GAMEINFORMER®

THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE

RAGE 2

Find out why it's the most promising shooter of 2019

POWER UP REWARDS

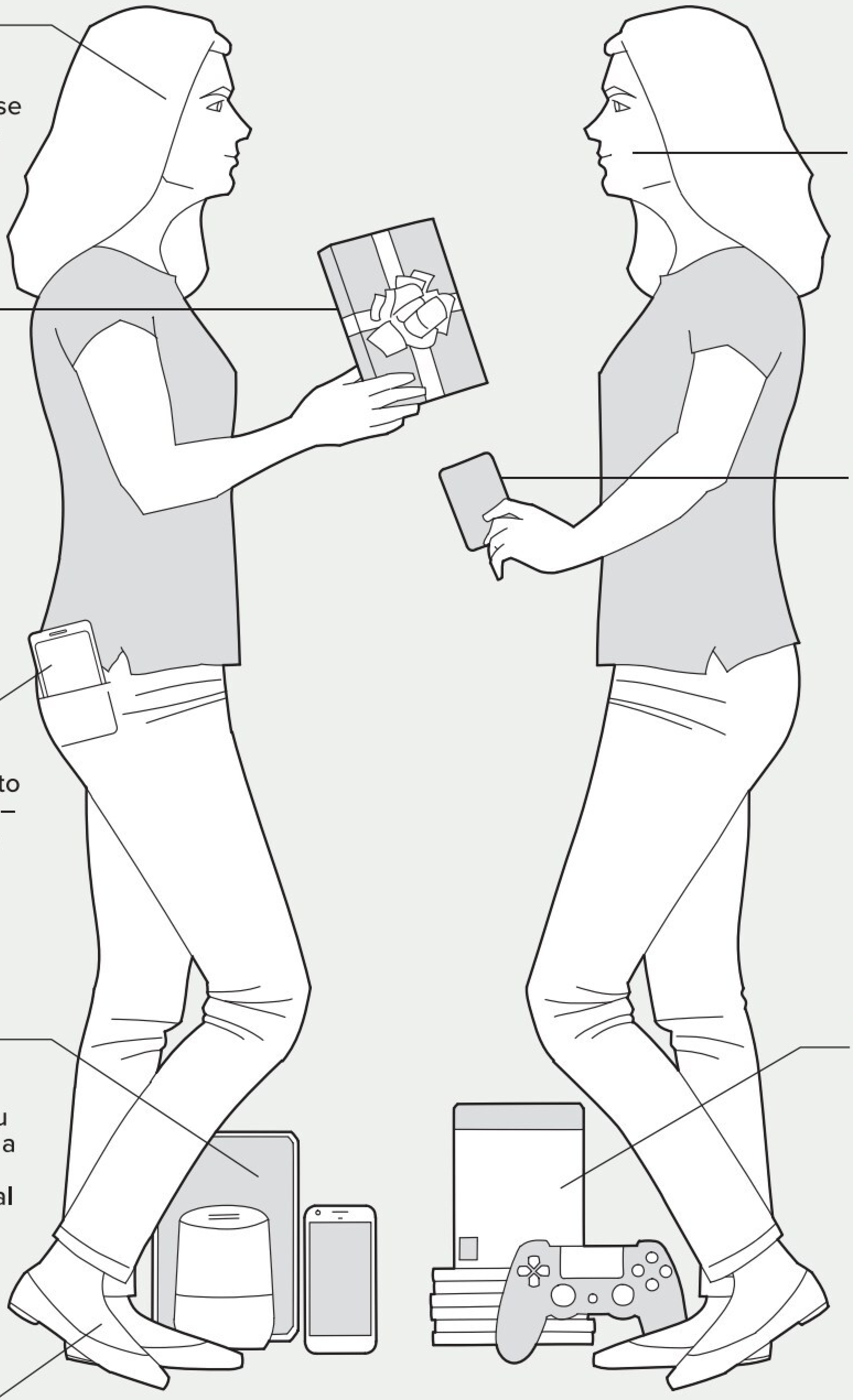
GAMER'S GUIDE TO SELF GIFTING

GIFT LIKE THE PRO YOU ARE

see fig. 1

WHO BETTER TO GIVE YOU THE PERFECT GIFT THAN...YOU

BECOME A SUCCESSFUL PRO SELF-GIFTER



1 Compliment yourself, because being a Pro has so many perks!

2 The involuntary "about to receive a gift" smile

3 As a Pro, score 2x points on purchases, then redeem them as a gift…for you

4 Your Pro membership is loaded with benefits and offers that make you a better (self) gifter

5 Phone with GameStop app to shop for others – and earn points for yourself

6 A 10% discount on pre-owned games and accessories – aka a discount on gifts for yourself

7 10% extra on trades gives you more $$ to buy a perfect gift for someone special (you)

8 Relaxed stance comes with knowing you always give you the perfect gift

Figure 1

GameStop
POWERUP
REWARDS

E3 At A Tipping Point

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com
@GI_AndyMc

When you are writing a letter from the editor in November about the Electronic Entertainment Expo (which happens in the middle of summer), you know something is up. Sony Interactive Entertainment recently announced its plans to back out of E3 in 2019, and I can't say I'm shocked. I've written many a letter about how I felt E3 didn't quite know who it was for after it stopped catering to industry buyers long ago.

To me, the annual event's most important role over the years was putting a spotlight on the games business. Our day in the sun if you will. It made outlets that didn't cover games say things like, "Did you know games are bigger than movies?" Statements that are not always quite accurate, and as time passed they also felt belittling. I don't feel games need to find relevance in comparison to other industries. Games are games, and anyone who doubts their power is simply out of touch. We no longer need to scream from the highest mountain that games are important, as games are pretty much everywhere these days.

E3 started to move slowly toward consumers a few years back, and frankly, I think that's a good thing. I also think Sony dropping out of this year's show is a good thing as well, because I believe it will force the Entertainment Software Association (who runs the show) to finish the transformation from industry to fan fest. Yes, it definitely makes me considerably less excited about the event, because the battle between the publishers has always been a hallmark of the show. With one of them missing, it just won't feel the same.

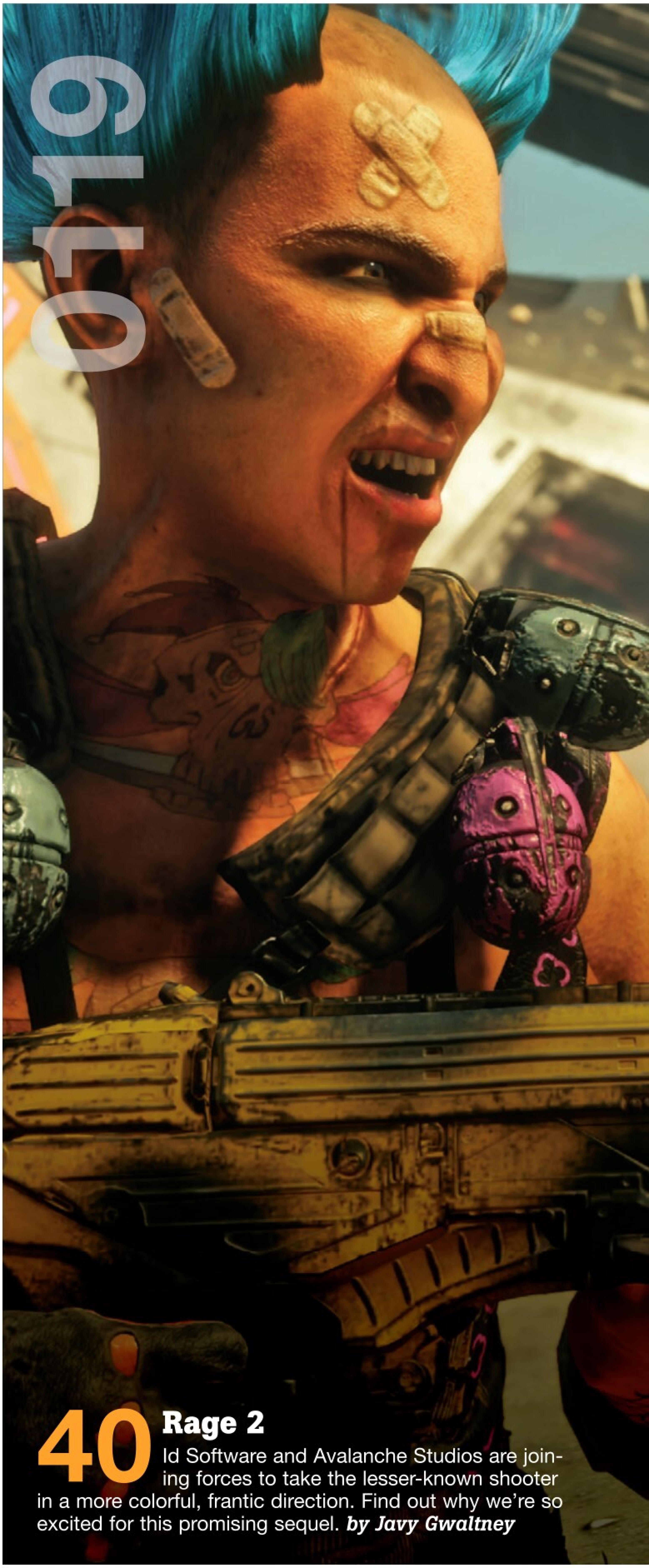
That said, E3 needs to rip off the band-aid and become a fan-focused event. I know E3 is big business and change is difficult, but the ESA needs to understand publishers are making these changes with their own self-interest in mind. E3 can still play an important role, it just needs to accept the fact that big companies will run their own events where they can own the news cycle. The show runners need to adapt quickly or E3 could find itself left behind by the industry it represents.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

Andy

visit gameinformer.com daily for the latest and greatest, and follow @gameinformer on Twitter



40 Rage 2

Id Software and Avalanche Studios are joining forces to take the lesser-known shooter in a more colorful, frantic direction. Find out why we're so excited for this promising sequel. ***by Javy Gwaltney***

10 Drugs, Hacks & Bribes

Just like in traditional sports, cheating and drug use is also a complicated issue in esports.

14 Gaming Together

It's the time of year when you will be spending time away from work with friends and family, so we put together a list of games particularly suited for playing with both gamer and non-gamer friends alike.

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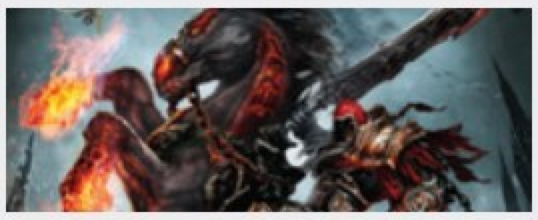

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Over the past few years, THQ Nordic has acquired several recognizable game brands. We examine the company's next moves.

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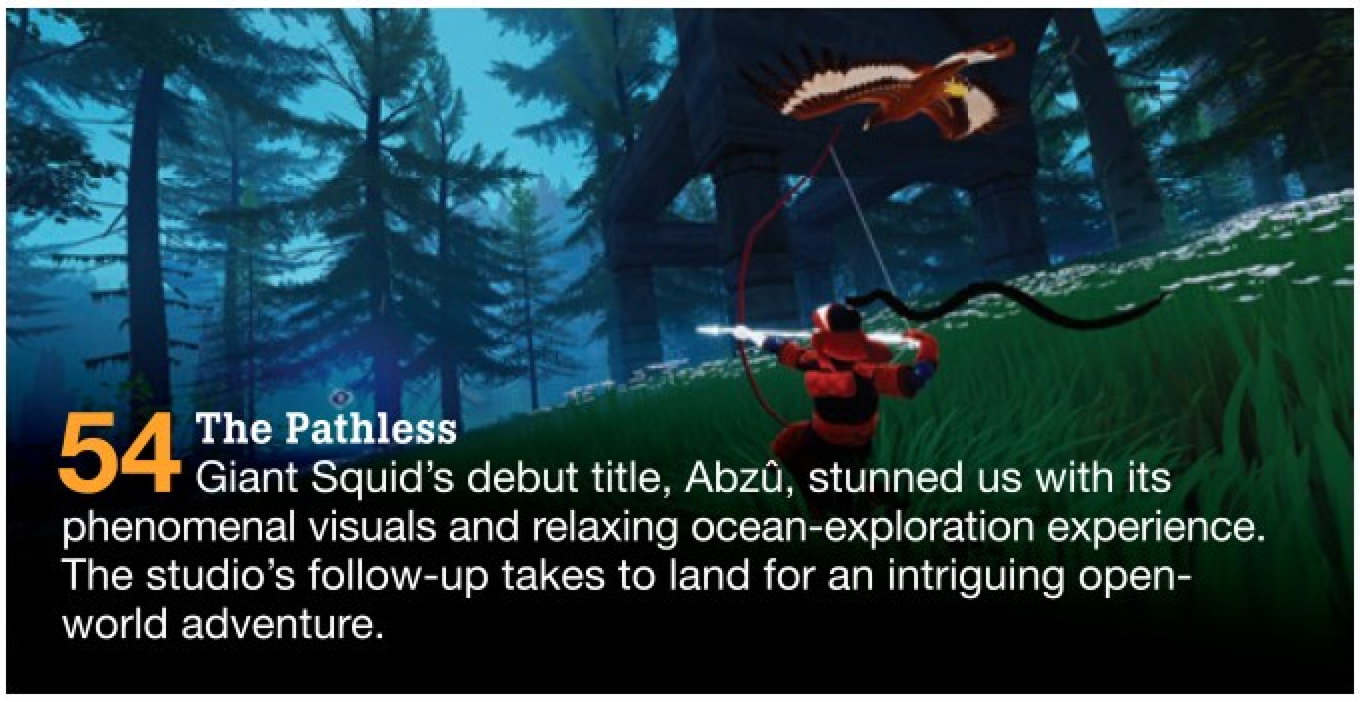
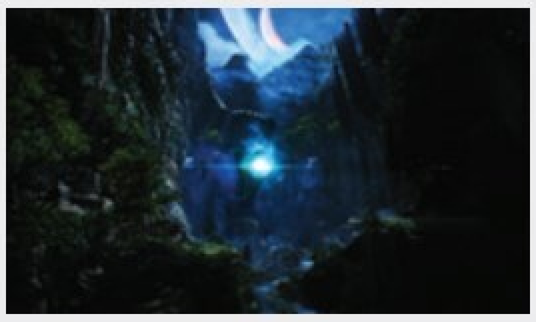
We mapped out every potential action possible in the battle royale genre.



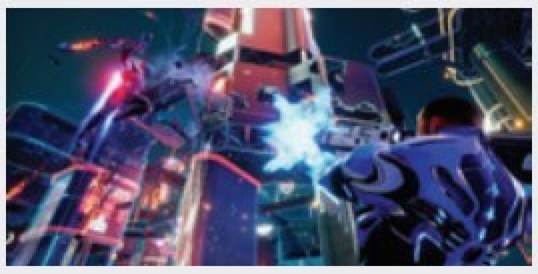
54 The Pathless

Giant Squid's debut title, Abzû, stunned us with its phenomenal visuals and relaxing ocean-exploration experience. The studio's follow-up takes to land for an intriguing open-world adventure.



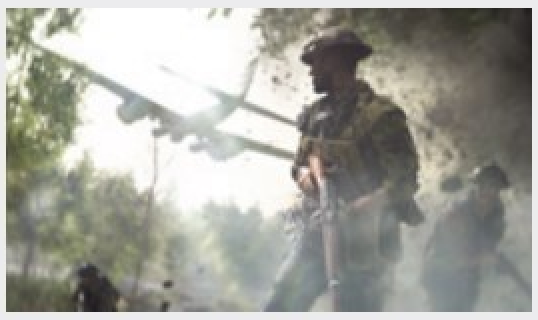
60 Anthem

Bioware's RPG/shooter hybrid is shaping up to be an exciting new experience.



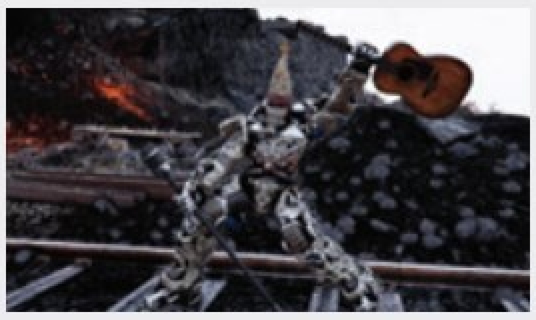
64 Crackdown 3

Few games have been delayed as often as Crackdown 3, but we think this final release date will stick.



78 Battlefield V

The Call of Duty competition is tough this year. Is Battlefield able to compete?



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Learn whether this wasteland is compelling enough to power through myriad technical problems.

87 Tetris Effect

We all know (and love) Tetris, but Tetris Effect elevates the familiar game to a new stirring level.

90 Pokémon Let's Go, Pikachu & Eevee

It's not quite the console Pokémon game we've been demanding for years – but it's good!

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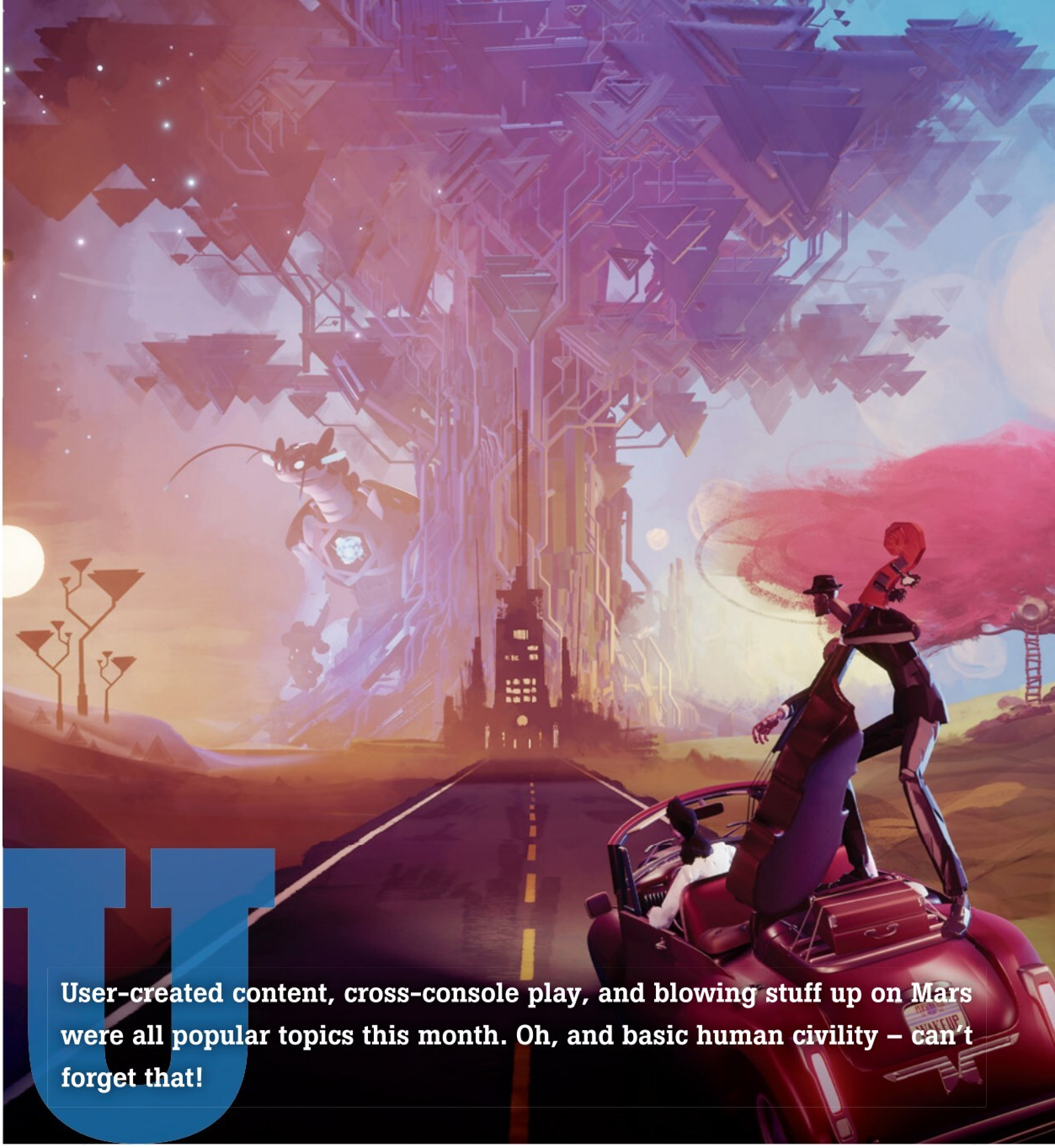
feedback



User-created content, cross-console play, and blowing stuff up on Mars were all popular topics this month. Oh, and basic human civility – can't forget that!

Only In Dreams

Thanks so much for your in-depth look at Dreams (issue 307). I haven't kept up with news about it, and honestly didn't know much other than that it's a new Media Molecule game. After reading your preview, it definitely has me intrigued! The ability to make levels and indeed whole games while having fun seems to be right up my alley. The visuals look amazing as well. I'm looking forward to picking it up.

Codie Kiser
via email

Despite our previous coverage, we were just as intrigued and surprised by Dreams during our visit to Media Molecule's studio. It's not an exaggeration to say that Dreams is a game engine first and foremost, and capable of accommodating just about any experience you're looking to create in it – even our cover was made in Dreams! Whether the developer can make the tools simple enough for us amateurs remains to be seen, but you can learn more at gameinformer.com/dreams.

Call Of Duty

I knew it wouldn't be long before politics found its way into another cherished entertainment medium. Your opinion piece (Gamers Should Be Voting, So Why Aren't We?, issue 307) was a sad attempt at getting gamers involved in politics and voting. I really wish you people would just let entertainment be just that – entertainment. Now I assume I am supposed to jump up and take on this "establishment" that is ruining my life? I will not be renewing my subscription so that I can shield my favorite escape from politics without having to see or support this nonsense. I can't wait to see what you all will ruin next.

Jim C.
via email

Thank you for the op-ed on gamers and voting. I'm 38 years old and have been gaming since I was about 6, but more importantly, I'm also an elected official. I agree with your observations about voting, and would go one step further – I don't see many gamers involved in politics in any form. I am a trustee in my village, and there's only one other member about my age that plays games. I would love to see more gamers involved in the political process. Voting is a way to make your voice heard – even if your candidate doesn't win, showing that hundreds,

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

thousands, or millions of people voted for something can influence policy decisions. Also, please vote in your local elections; they do so much more to affect your day-to-day life. Anyway, thank you advocating for a demographic that deserves to have more influence.

Dustin Heuser
Volo, IL

We heard from a number of readers this month who were absolutely shocked we would encourage our readers to…partake in the fundamental civic duty that democracy hinges on? The irony is that by voting, you really do have the power to influence the issues you care about the most. By writing angry emails to us? Not so much. As for the "Keep politics out of games!" argument – we hate to break it to you, but video games (along with their development, discourse, and consumption) have *always* been political. If you hadn't noticed before, it's probably because you agreed with the message.

For Faction's Sake

Red Faction: Guerrilla is the one game I come back to time and time again. There is just nothing quite as exhilarating as ramming a dump truck through a building and watching the mayhem ensue. Why the hell isn't THQ Nordic doing more with this insanely great tech? The "Re-Mars-tered" edition of Guerrilla was the bomb, but how about a new game? Why not license the Geo-Mod engine, or use that tech in some of their other properties? Can you imagine a Dead Island game that uses Geo-Mod? Hell yeah!

Jim Cirile
Los Angeles, CA

We'd actually be more interested in THQ Nordic using the Geo-Mod engine in a new Saints Row or TimeSplitters, but your point still stands. While the lackluster Red Faction: Armageddon put the series on ice, the new publisher's recent remaster of Guerilla is certainly a good sign. To learn more about THQ Nordic's plans for the future turn to our feature on page 28.

One Small Steps

A few months ago, I wrote in asking about Overwatch and cross-console support. It appeared in the "Short Answers" section, and basically said it was up to Sony. But now that Sony is in the Fortnite Cross Console beta, could this possibly open the doors for Overwatch as well? I know Overwatch isn't as popular as it used to be, but it still has a large player base, and cross-console play could make some people who stopped playing get back into it. I'm interested in your opinion.

Lucas Kruger
via email

You don't have to go by our opinion, Lucas. We asked Sony on your behalf, and here's their official reply: "We have no plans to announce at this point, but our goal remains to take a more open stance with cross-platform support that's aligned with our mission to deliver the best consumer experience." It may not be the confirmation you're looking for, but the odds are better than they were a few months ago. Feel free to reach out and let Sony know what you think would be the "best experience" as one of their consumers.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"After seeing Town, am I the only one thinking Game Freak is on the verge of making a game about human slavery?"

You are definitely the only one thinking that.

"How come you don't put anymore Xbox 360 games in the issue?"

Because they don't make them anymore.

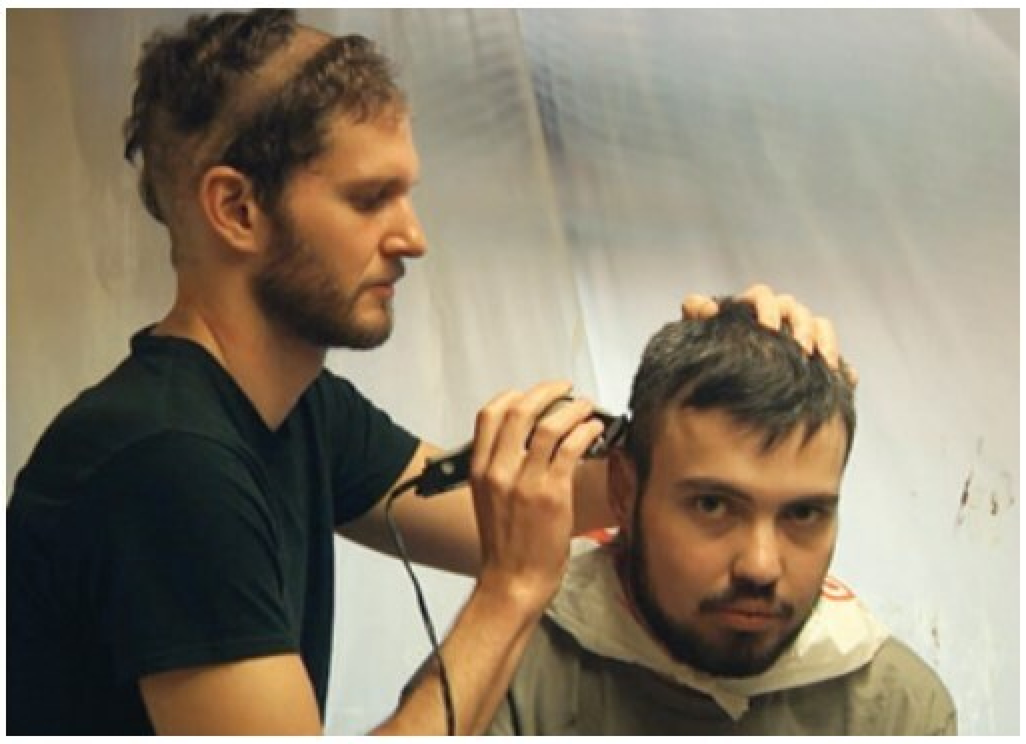
"Why are so many heroes still jogging around on two legs?"

Because all the three-legged heroes have trouble finding pants to wear on their quest.

Question Of The Month:

What's your favorite game to play during the harsh winter months?

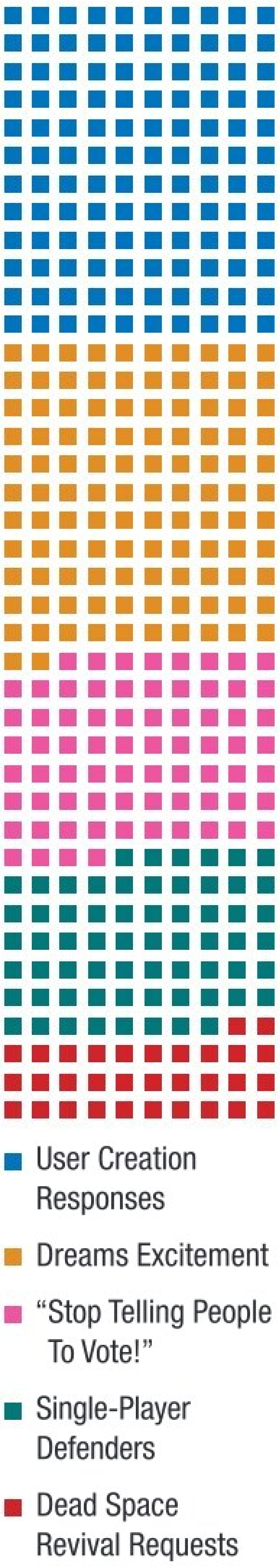
gi spy



(Left) This month the fine folks at Giant Squid Games gave us a look at their new game, The Pathless, which you can check out on page 54. **(Right)** Hanson and Suriel gave each other some real special haircuts during this year's 25-hour Extra Life charity livestream. Move over, Great Clips!

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind



What In Creation?!

In issue 307, we asked readers to share the best thing they've ever made in a video game. While Minecraft creations were the most popular response, other readers thought outside the block.

My best creation would have to be a mansion set into a mountain in Minecraft. I was only eight at the time so I wasn't that good at red stone, but I put my heart into it. I went all out with lights, doors, secret passageways, and elevators. I even started to make a town on top of the mountain, but then I accidentally deleted the world.

Caleb Turecek

I created a custom enchanted ring in Skyrim. I crafted it to greatly enhance both my carrying capacity and Unarmed fighting skill. I named it "Hoist Gracie." I sure hope someone who knows MMA/UFC appreciates the reference!

Greg Lancaster

I have to go with a mob grinder in Minecraft that pushed zombies into lava and then used pistons and command blocks to move them into water so they would think that they were saved. Then it pushed them back in. Yes, I might be psychotic.

Andrew Adelman

I created God in WWE 2K18. That is all.

Nick Lawson

Thumper's Mom Was Right

I've been an avid gamer for 20+ years, ever since an Italian plumber jumped on things that looked like turd emojis with feet. I've watched as systems have grown more and more powerful, producing some of the most beautiful works of art. I've also watched the rise of message boards and social media, which are the worst thing to happen to video games. Hardly anyone has anything productive to say online, and feeds are full of toxic, hateful, bigoted people garnering for attention. I am all about expressing opinions, but people should use social media as a way of improving the gaming community, not tearing it down. When people are allowed to spew hate and harassment, we ultimately all lose. We all should try to appreciate what we have and get away from the "sea of mean" that the internet has become. If you don't have anything constructive to say, don't fill the gaming space with negativity and hate instead.

Matt
via email

It's always nice to be reminded that the point of playing video games is to have fun – a point that's particularly easy to forget when spending too much time online. While some take it as their self-appointed duty to rail against every game and opinion they don't like, you're under no obligation to listen or engage with them. Ignore the trolls and focus on the games and communities that make you happy!

(Left) Also during the livestream…we actually have no idea what's going on here. **(Right)** But seriously, thanks to everyone who helped us raise over $78,000 for Gillette Children's Specialty Healthcare – even if the donations came with a pie or two to the face!

(continued on page 8)

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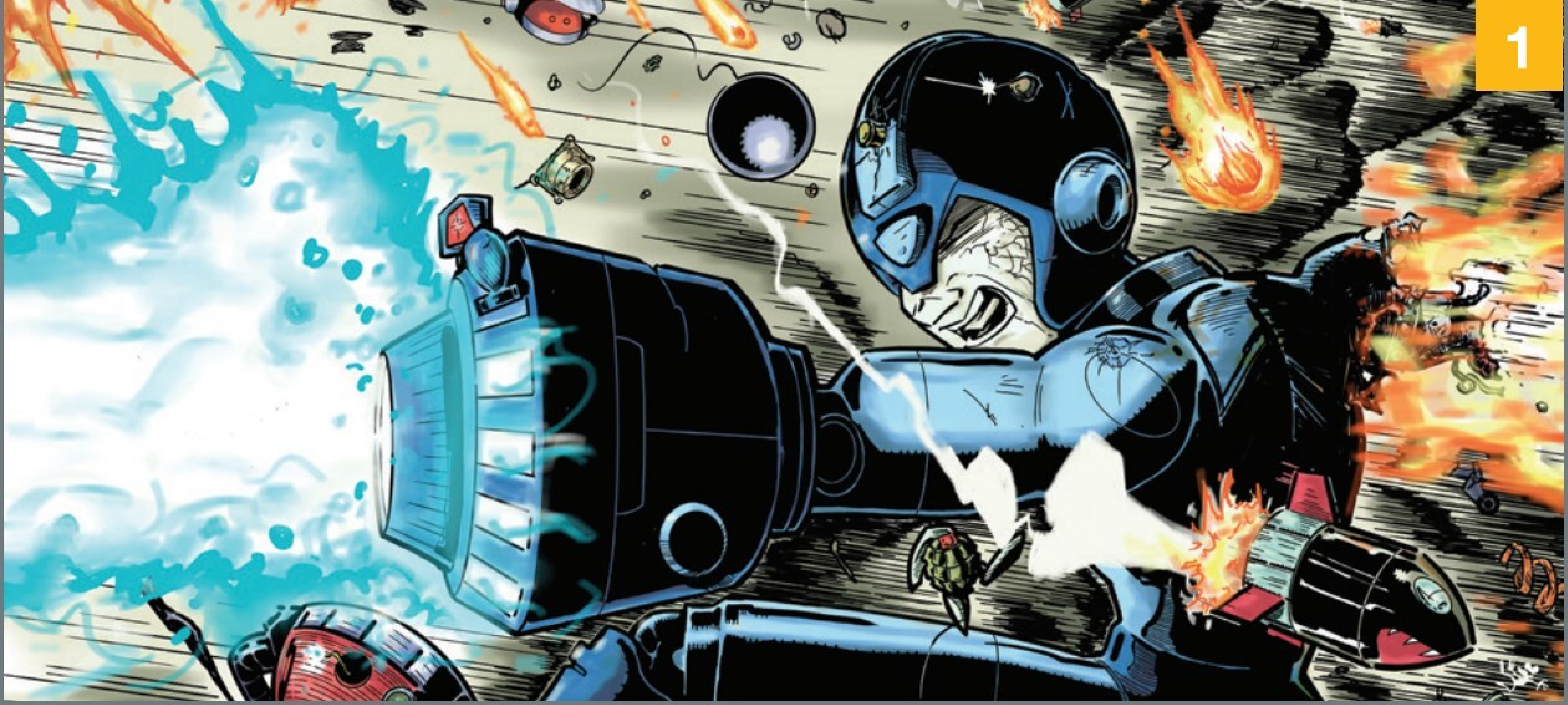
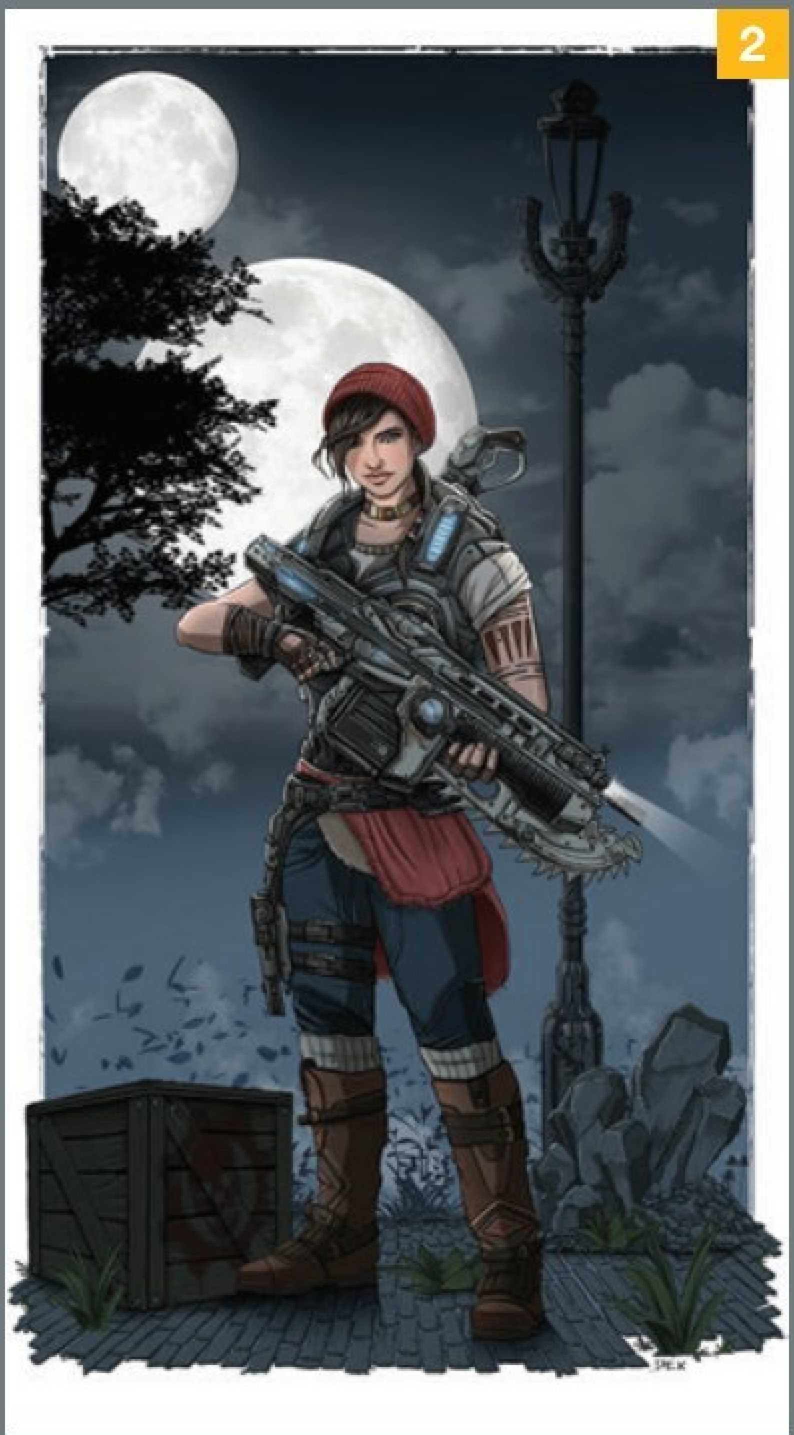
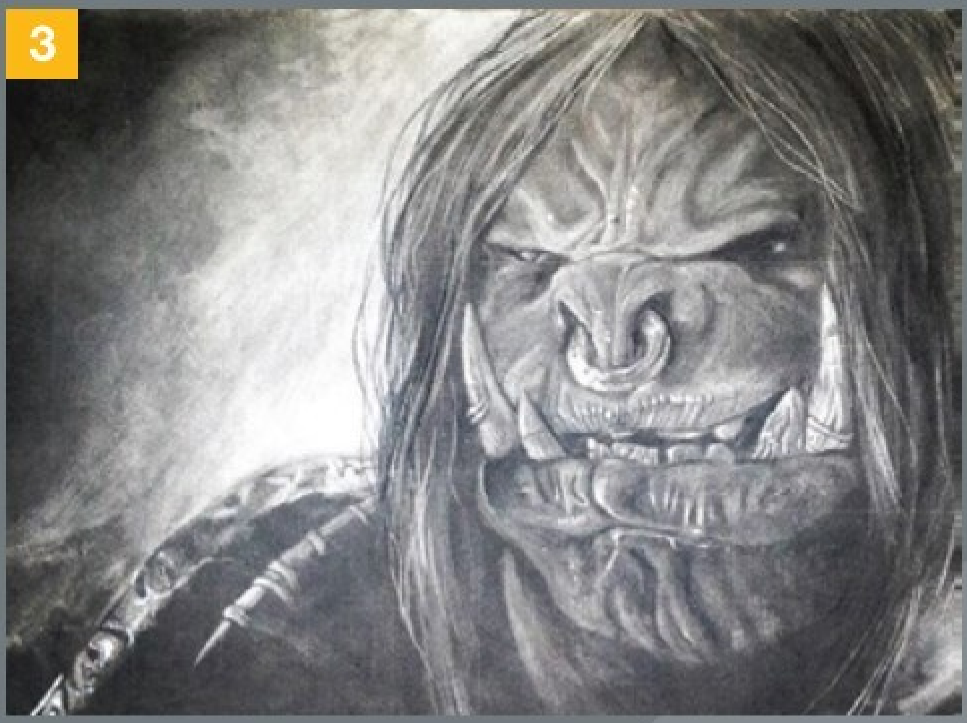
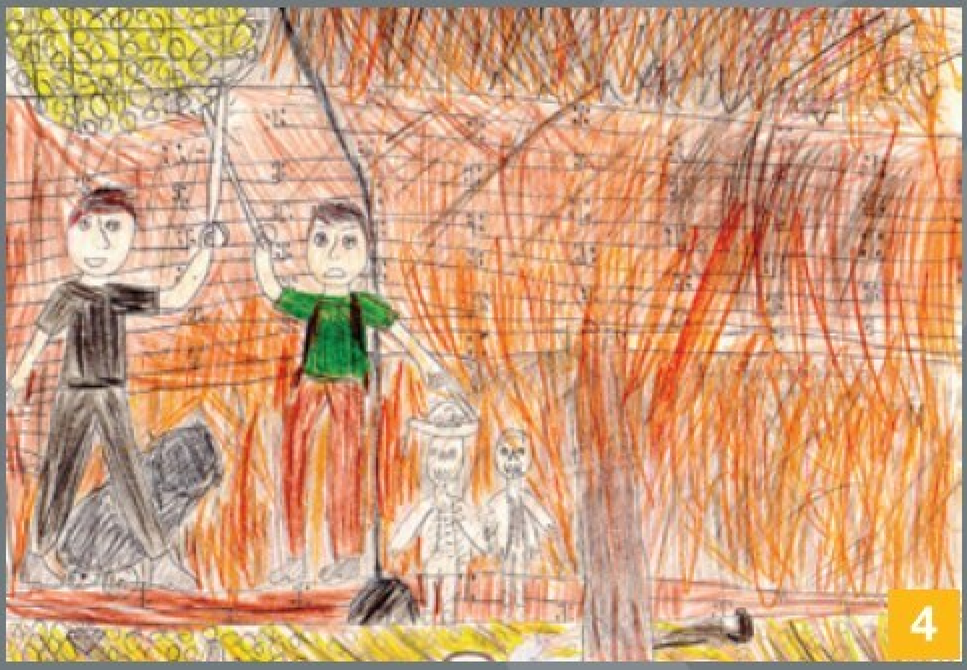
gallery









WINNER

1 Josh Rudd

Did Josh…just kill Mega Man?!

2 Dexter Weeks

Is this the first glimpse of a Gears of War/ Archer crossover? Probably not.

3 Catherine Cottle

That guy's ugly mug would've been perfectly timed for last month's issue, but we can see why it took a little extra time.

4 Hallie Verdeck

Once you realize what game this is from, it all makes perfect sense!

» Submit your art for a chance to win our monthly prize «

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(Left) Dan Tack talked orcs and Overwatch with Blizzard's J. Allen Brack, Rob Hilburger, and Meelad Sadat at this year's Blizzcon. **(Right)** Enhance Games' Tetsuya Mizuguchi and Mark MacDonald finally revealed the secret to getting a tetris in their new game, Tetris Effect. Hint: You gotta use the long piece!

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Drugs, Hacks & Bribes

How esports athletes are destroying their careers by cheating

by Andrew Reiner

T

The careers of professional gamers are often short. Teenagers and young 20-somethings are the stars of most esports leagues, attaining great fame and fortune until age nerfs their reflexes and they are forced to retire. Competing at the highest level requires extensive training and focus. Great pressure is applied to these athletes, who are often a part of teams that demand results. Some players will do anything to stay competitive, even if that means cheating to gain an edge. Some use performance-enhancing drugs, others upload third-party cheating software, and some even smuggle in banned gear. These competitors have been caught cheating in tournaments that pay out thousands of dollars, or propel them to position where they could win even more.

Given the large number of people who have been banned, getting caught cheating in esports is much easier than other organized sports. We seldom see corked bats in baseball, but software cheats are detected all of the time. Players attempting to cheat are often caught mid-game by anti-cheat software. While tournaments are monitored closely, the software also tracks every match that is played, hopefully stopping cheaters before they reach the pro levels. Valve's Anti-Cheat technology, which debuted in Counter-Strike in 2002, banned over 100,000 Steam players in various games in a single week earlier this year. On top of this, over 50 pro players are currently banned from Valve-sponsored Counter-Strike: Global Offensive events for cheating in various ways. That's over 50 tournament bans for just one video game.

The Esports Integrity Coalition, which is a nonprofit association created to curb match manipulation and betting fraud, recently issued a five-year ban to CS:GO team OpTic India player Nikhil "forsaken" Kumawat for using an aimbot hack during this year's Extremesland Zowie Asia tournament held in Shanghai. The aimbot granted Kumawaut a degree of automated target acquisition. The ESIC's analysis determined the software cheat was used numerous times after being discovered on Kumawat's solid-state drive. Kumawat also received a six-month ban in 2017. Following the ban, ESIC commissioner Ian Smith said "[Kumawat] has caused great damage to Indian CS:GO and esports and devalued an excellent competition. There is no place in esports for cheats like Kumawat and, on a personal level, I hope we never see him back in CS:GO or any other game again."

Overwatch, which has become one of the most highly produced esports leagues to date, has been riddled with cheating scandals. A top 200-ranked Korean player named "Kid x" was banned for aimbot use. Korean Overwatch leaderboards were also rocked by a country-wide problem called "nuking." This hack sends a DDOS-like attack to the opponents' IP addresses, and ultimately makes the game unwinnable for them. The creator of this hack was sentenced to a year in prison and two years of probation.

Overwatch League issued a 30-game ban to Su-min "SADO" Kim, one of Philadelphia Fusion's tank players, for an act called account boosting. As the name implies, Kim was caught taking money to play on other people's accounts to raise their rankings. Since he's a talented player, Kim could effectively get them to pro levels. If these players somehow managed to make a pro team, they would be out of their league, much like an amateur football player stepping into the shoes of Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers for a game.

If match fixing is in play, this amateur player could advance in a competitive tournament. Esports' rise in betting markets has led to players throwing matches for financial kickback. In 2016, Lee Seung-Hyun (who played StarCraft II under the name "Life") was sentenced to 18 months in prison for intentionally throwing matches. There's no easy solution to this, but the Electronic Sports League and ESIC have systems in place to monitor for match fixing activity.

The ESL has strict anti-doping policies, but some of the more prominent esports leagues haven't implemented drug testing yet, and instead offer code of conduct rules, despite there being concern of players getting hooked on drugs like Adderall, a legal, but addictive stimulatnt often used to treat hyperactivity disorder. In 2015, pro Counter-Strike player Kory "SEMPHIS" Friesen said he and teammates from Cloud9 used Adderall to end a losing streak.

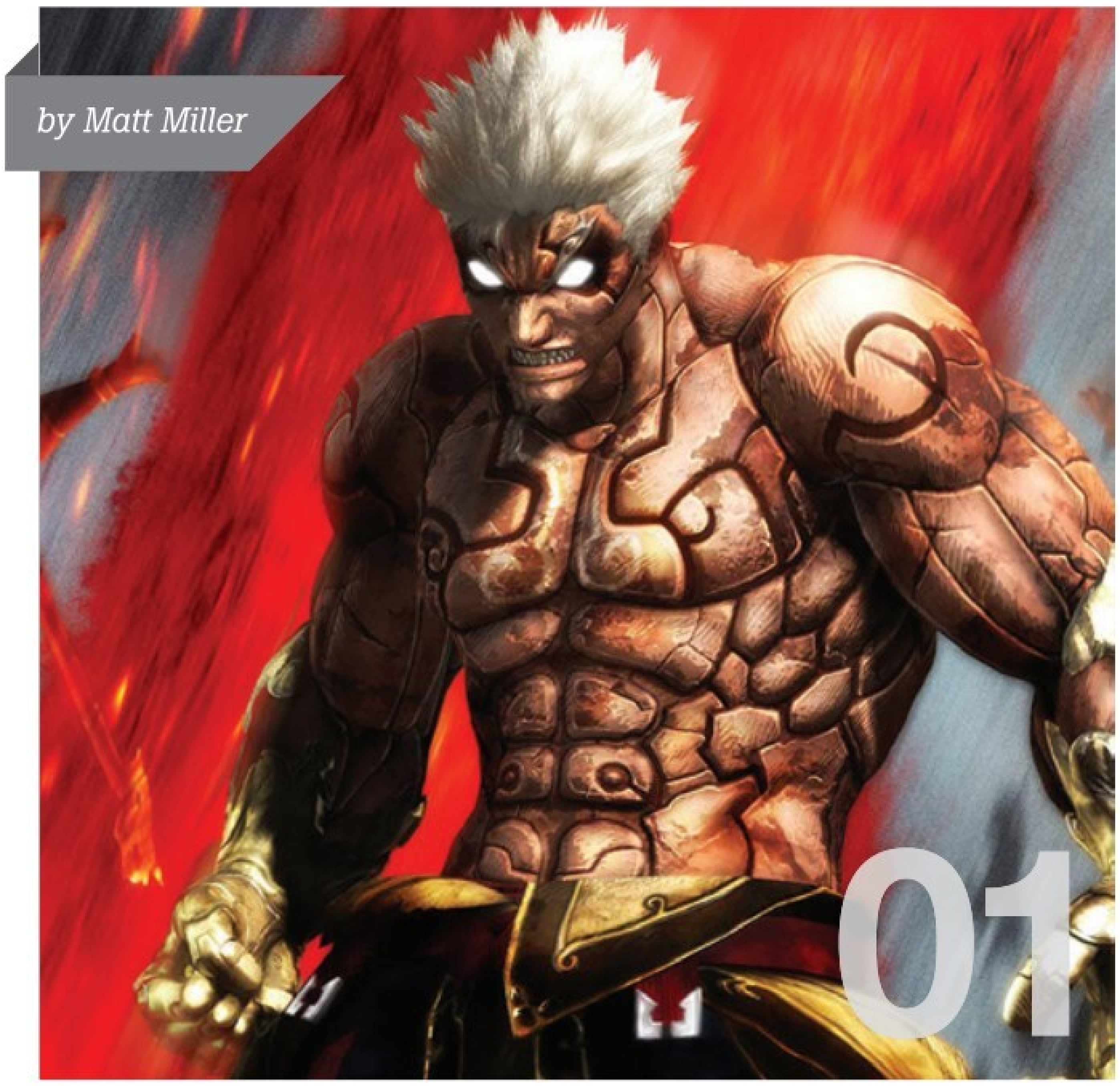
In the following year, fellow Counter-Strike player Charlie "K1NDEADLY" Weber was banned for two years by epic.LAN for drug use. Jon Winkle, the managing director of epic.LAN, commented on the ban, saying "We must be absolutely clear in our stance when it comes to use of illegal substances at our event, we will not accept it and anyone involved will be removed and banned from future events."

Paying players more is another way to help minimize match fixing, but the desire to be the best is something every competitive player strives for, and they may cheat to stay relevant. As esports continue to grow, and more money is funneled into them, the integrity of the competition needs to be maintained. That will mean stricter cheating measures must be instituted. ◆

top ten

RAGERS

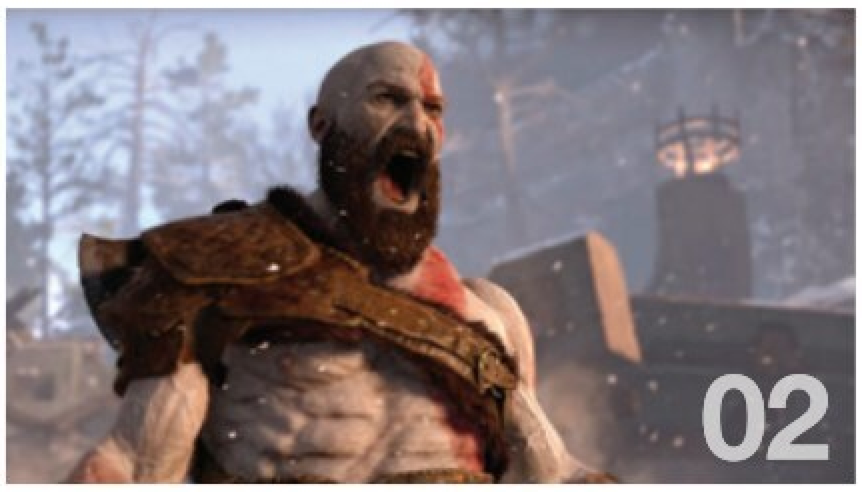
by Matt Miller



Asura

Asura's Wrath

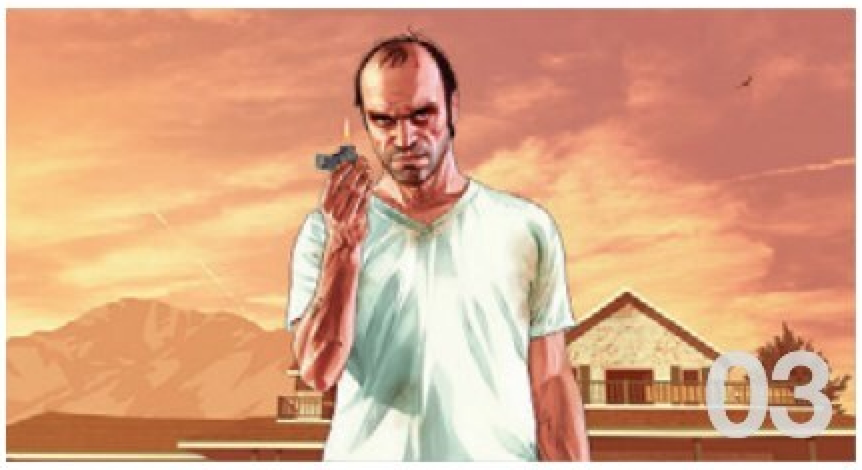
Betrayed and abandoned by those he trusted, his wife murdered, his daughter kidnapped, the demigod Asura wreaks havoc across the cosmos in a seemingly endless bout of divine anger. He brings tantrum throwing to a whole new level. His fury literally consumes planets in flame.



Kratos

God of War

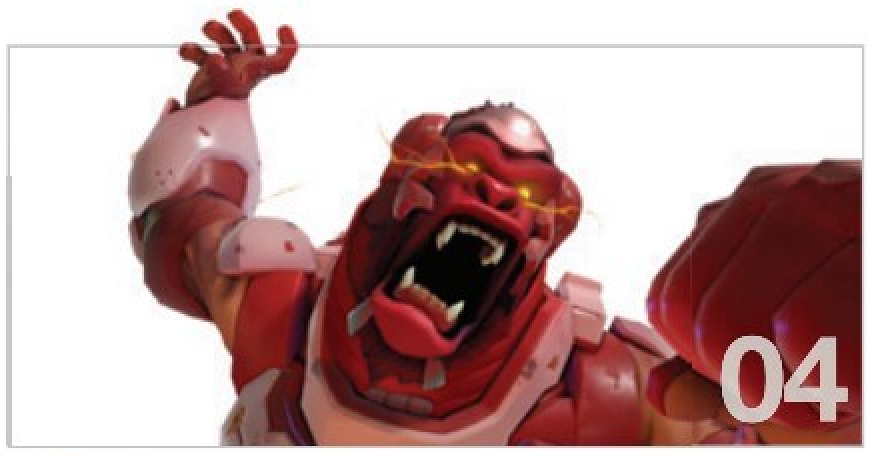
Whether he wanders the ancient Greek or Norse worlds, the ashen-faced god of war is a simmering pot always threatening to boil over. When that heat rises, his violent outbursts are cathartic, terrifying, and unstoppable. Whatever happened to the Greek gods? Kratos happened.



Trevor Phillips

Grand Theft Auto V

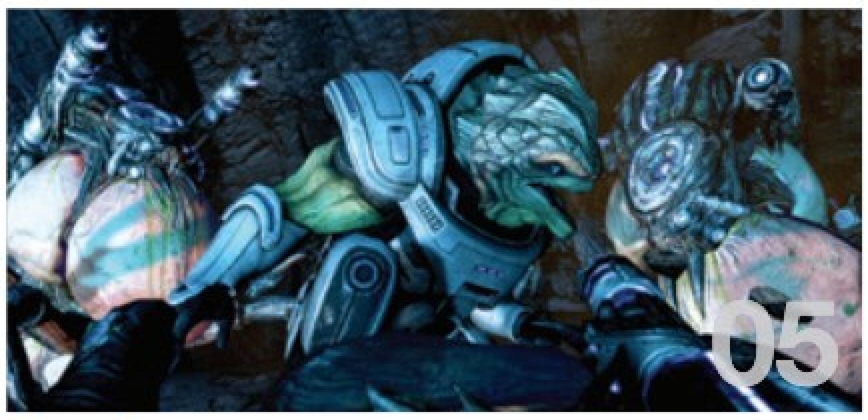
Every one of Grand Theft Auto V's protagonists fulfills a different fantasy, and Trevor represents the unbridled id of players who just want to cut loose. Devoid of inhibitions and unrestrained by morals, Trevor kills with wild abandon and lets his anger drive him to heinous acts of violence.



Winston

Overwatch

A cartoon Dr. Jekkyl and Mr. Hyde, Winston is a sweet-tempered gorilla, genetically engineered to great intelligence and scientific understanding. But threaten his friends and he transforms into a raging red monster of unstoppable strength and size, bowling into the competition with a roaring leap.



Grunt

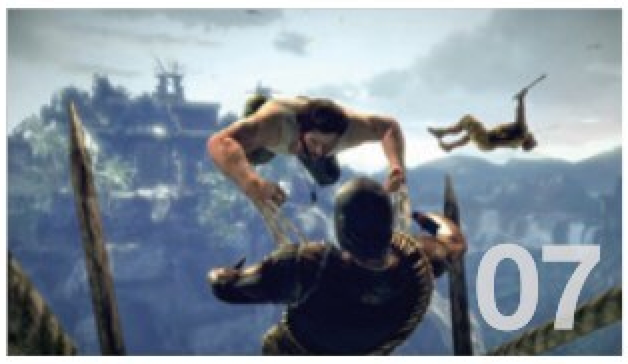
Mass Effect 2

Krogans have a lot to be angry about. Their home world is essentially destroyed, and a genophage virtually wiped out their ability to reproduce. Engineered to exemplify his species' overwhelming might, Grunt charges into battle fueled by his culture's devastation and his own personal demons.

Berserker

Gears of War

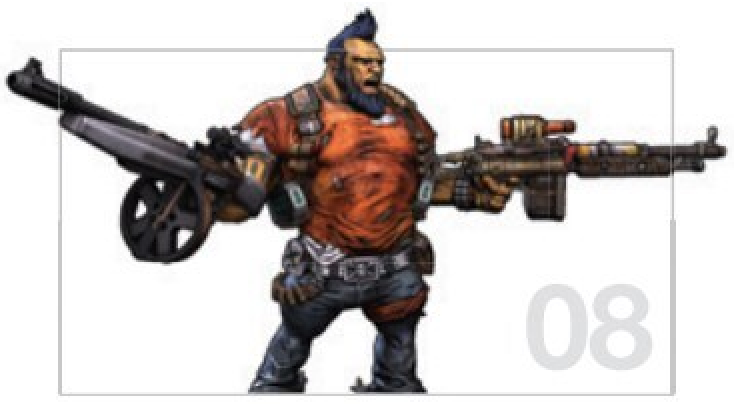
Hell hath no fury like a locust scorned and riddled with bullets. The all-female berserkers may have been blind, but that doesn't stop them from charging at high speed to splatter COG soldiers into bloody pieces. These giant monsters make for some of the most memorable and scary fights in the series.



Wolverine

X-Men Origins: Wolverine

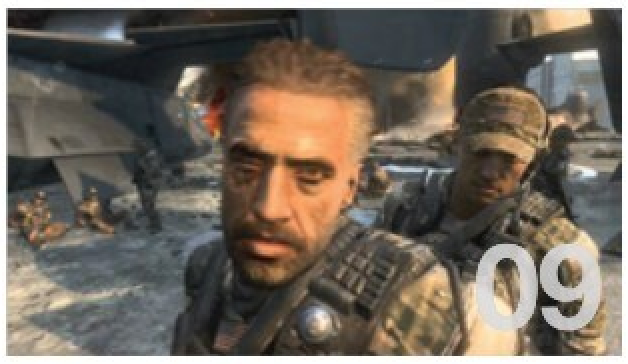
When many people think of rage-driven warriors, Logan is the first character who pops to mind. The razor-sharp "snikt" of his claws is always a preface to overwhelming devastation, but with his rage meter full, his lunging strikes are a violent dance of death.



Salvador

Borderlands 2

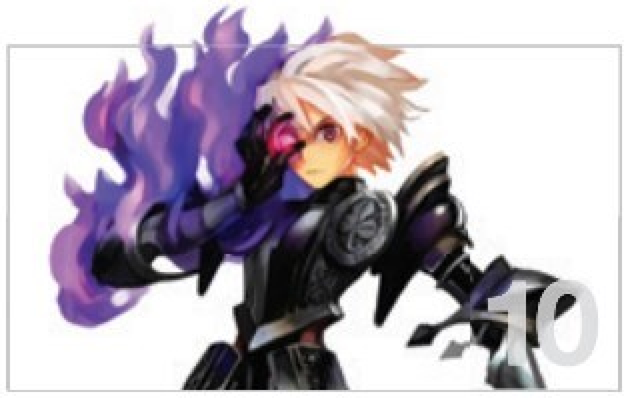
Many of our most potent ragers do so up close and personal, but the steroid-enhanced Gunzerker prefers to unleash his anger through heavy weaponry. His rampaging battles see him wielding an overpowered weapon in each hand as he manically shouts phrases like "Fistful of Pain!" and "Time to compensate!"



Raul Menendez

Call of Duty: Black Ops II

When his sister is threatened, Menendez's blazing fury takes over, and the players get a front row seat. As the bad guy, players run through the streets in a red-tinged haze, hacking apart enemies in a futile effort to avert the inevitable.



Oswald

Odin Sphere

The mighty knight plays out a classic redemption story in this mythology-inspired tale, but he never loses the searing rage that powers his attacks. In shadow form, his eyes glow bright red and his body turns black as he careens across the field of battle to calamitous effect. ◆

The Good

lyte
Scrivener Acolyte
179
8
Barrows Guard
Barrows Guard
Scrivener Warlock

Microsoft acquired **INXILE ENTERTAINMENT** (The Bard's Tale, Wasteland series) and **OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT** (Pillars of Eternity, Fallout: New Vegas), bolstering its internal studio structure that already added Undead Labs (State of Decay), Playground Games (Forza Horizon), Ninja Theory (Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice), and Compulsion Games (We Happy Few) earlier in the year.

The Bad

E3 – the annual industry tentpole convention in Los Angeles – lost another big exhibitor. Sony has decided against showing its games at **E3 2019** or holding a customary press conference around the June event. The company joins the ranks of big names such as Blizzard, Electronic Arts, and Rockstar Games, who no longer have a presence on the official show floor (although EA does hold its EA Play before E3 in LA).

The Ugly

Final Fantasy XV director **HAJIME TABATA** recently left Square Enix and the company axed all future DLC for the title after March's Episode Ardyn. This unfortunate news comes on the heels of Square Enix reporting a loss of $33 million from internal studio Luminous Productions, which Tabata headed. ◆

Quotable

> **"Good devs there, terrible management – hire the devs, fire the chaff at the top."**

Estranged former Obsidian developer **Chris Avellone** on the studio

GAMING TOGETHER

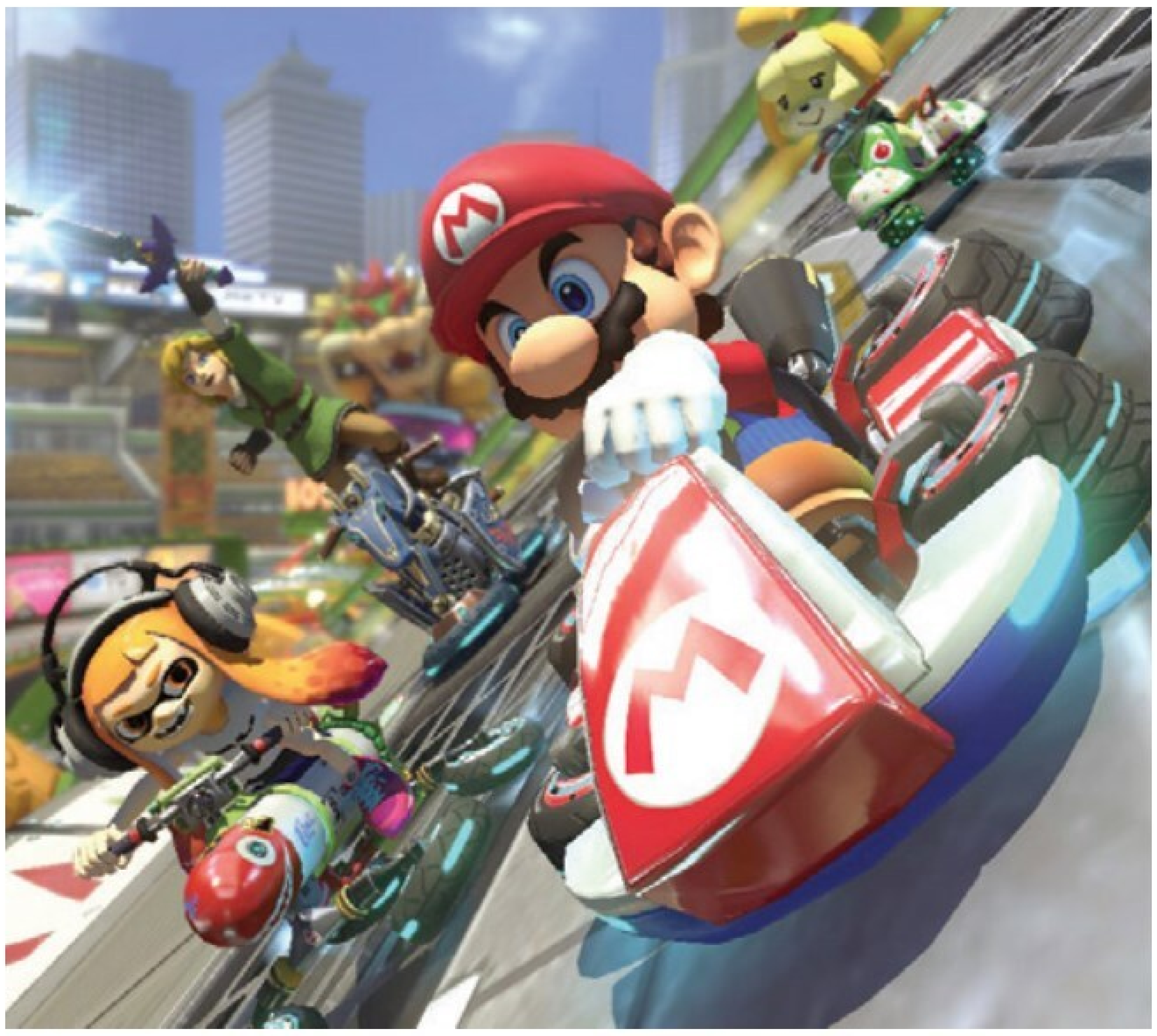
The holiday season often brings friends and families together. If you're hoping to keep gaming while spending time with them, here are some great picks for you all to enjoy.

by Brian Shea and Matt Miller

Mario Kart 8 Deluxe

Platform Switch Rating E

Few franchises appeal to everyone quite like Mario Kart, and the latest entry is the best, as Nintendo took the terrific Wii U entry and improved upon it for Switch. Mario Kart 8 Deluxe features all the characters, tracks, and DLC from the Wii U version, as well as the ability to hold two items at once, a revamped version of the fan-favorite Battle mode, and several new characters. This definitive version of the beloved game can host four players on one system, and the stable of recognizable characters makes it the perfect game to fire up at gatherings with family or friends.



Overcooked 2

Platform PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC **Rating** E

The follow up to the surprise 2016 hit, Overcooked 2 refines the formula and adds new scenarios to make for a frantic multiplayer experience. Whether you're trying to make burgers on floating platforms high above the ground or assemble tacos across two rafts heading downriver, you should expect the unexpected when it comes to Overcooked 2's situations. Not only is this kitchen game funny and exciting, but the simple controls allow nearly anyone to understand how to play in less than the time it takes to cook a pizza. This sequel adds the ability to toss food across the kitchen alongside online play options to dive into once everyone else in the house is asleep.

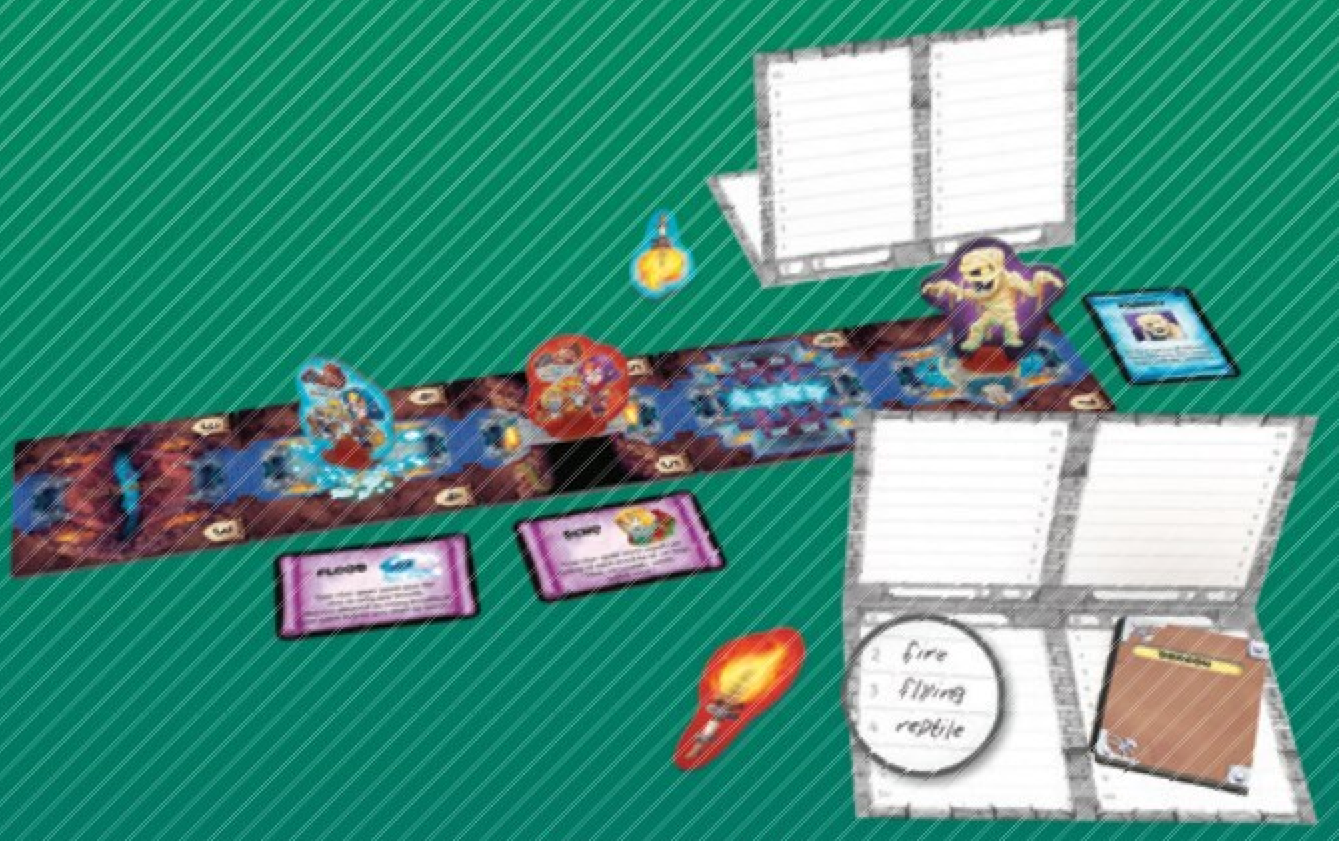
SUPER NINTENDO ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM
GAMES INCLUDED!
SUPER NINTENDO ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM CLASSIC EDITION

SNES Classic Edition

Publisher Nintendo **Rating** T

Whether you want to relive those childhood gaming memories with your parents or introduce your favorite games of all time to a younger sibling, Nintendo's SNES Classic Edition is one of the best and most convenient ways to experience some of the greatest video games from the '90s. From cooperative games like Donkey Kong Country and Super Mario World to competitive titles like Street Fighter II and Super Mario Kart, there are plenty of awesome multiplayer gems to sift through. In addition, you can sort the menu to find which games have multiplayer, helping to speed up the process. We recommend picking up some SNES Classic-compatible wireless gamepads or cable extenders to alleviate the short cables of the pack-in controllers.

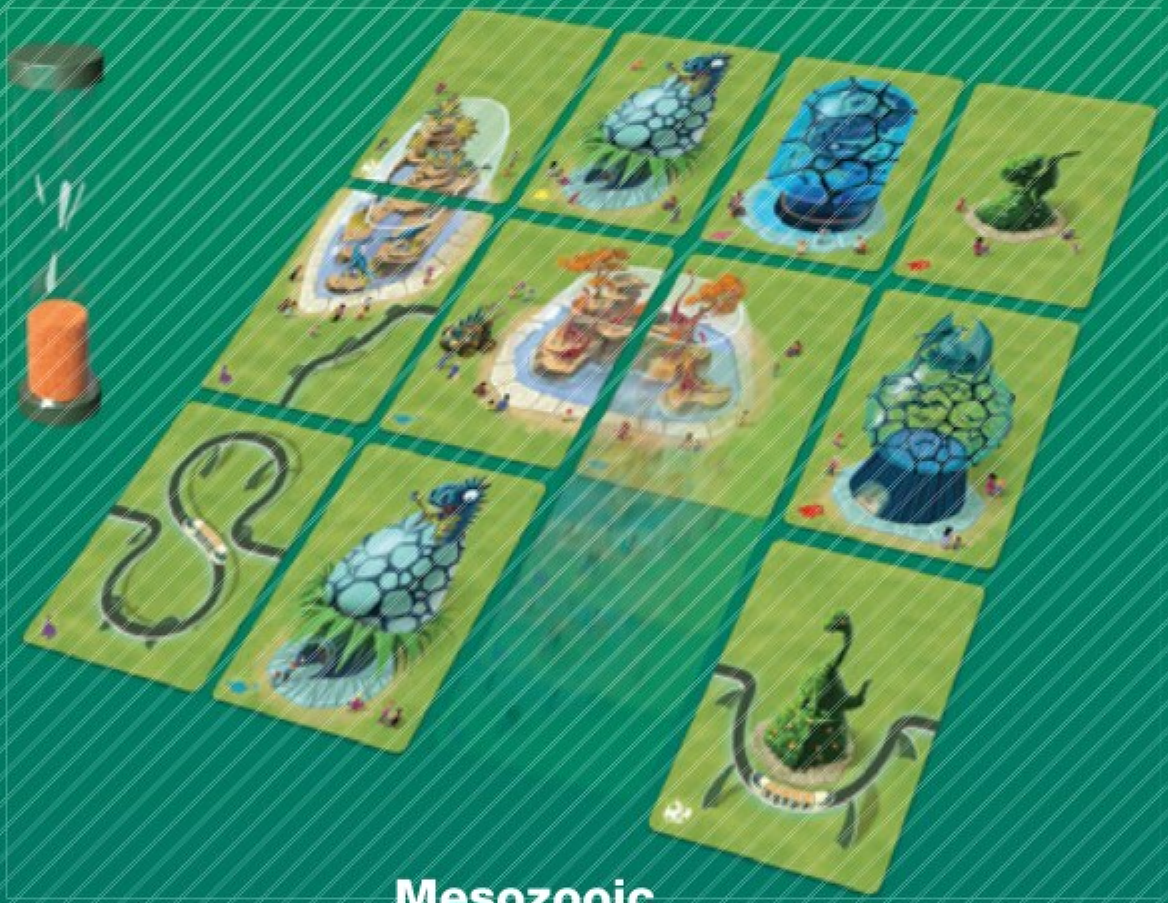
Together At The Table



Trapwords

Publisher Czech Games Edition **Rating** 8+

The publisher of the stellar Codenames card game brings this new twist on dungeon-crawling fantasy. Two teams compete to infiltrate a dangerous dungeon and bring down the monster hiding within. To progress, players must guess a word that a teammate is trying to describe, but the other team gets to set “trap words” that you don’t know about, which hold up your adventuring party’s momentum. Use unconventional words and descriptions to sneak past the traps and curses to win. Simple and accessible, with colorful art that is friendly to the whole family, this party game’s magical trappings give it that little something extra to keep everyone coming back for more.



Mesozooic

Publisher Z-Man Games **Rating** 8+

This real-time puzzle game sees up to six players vying to build the best dinosaur park they can. But park visitors will only be impressed if you manage to get everything in the right place! Cards are acquired from a draft around the table, and then played onto your own personal grid in front of you, but with only one empty space to maneuver. Flip the hourglass over, and you’ve got less than a minute to slide your cards into place to connect monorails, complete enclosures, set up entry gates, and even make sure that T. rex is appropriately situated in the middle of the park. What could go wrong? Mesozooic is an absolute blast, and the whole family can get into the fast-paced card positioning gameplay.

Until Dawn

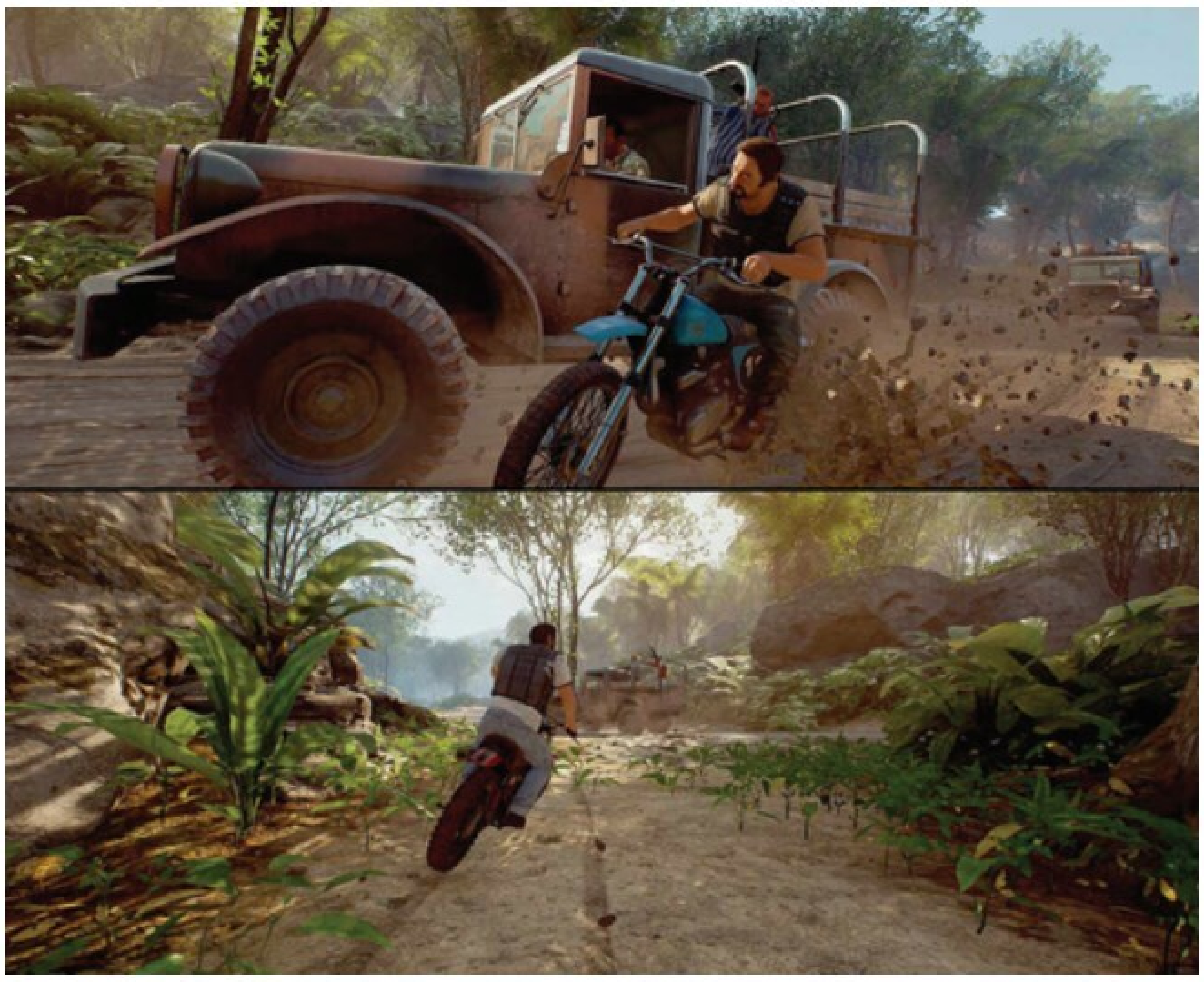
Platform PS4 **Rating** M

Turn off all the lights and get a group of horror-loving friends together for one of the best choice-driven narrative adventure games of the past few years. Starring recognizable faces like Hayden Panettiere and Rami Malek, Until Dawn fits perfectly into the teen slasher genre as a group of high school friends find themselves in the middle of a horrifying mystery in an isolated mountaintop cabin. Throughout the game, you make literal life-and-death choices that impact the story in ways you may not be able to predict. While Until Dawn is technically a single-player game, watching the events unfold and coaching the player on their decisions effortlessly transitions to a group setting.

A Way Out

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC **Rating** M

Telling the story of two men escaping from prison and living a life on the run, A Way Out is unique in that it must be played cooperatively; there is no single-player option. In a novel concept, the story tells the tale of these two characters simultaneously, with both players on screen at the same time, even if they aren’t together. With plenty of action sequences and a compelling story to get immersed in, A Way Out is a fun adventure to experience together. In addition, it can easily be completed over a couple of play sessions, so you don’t need to worry about heading back home with an incomplete story; even if you do, you can pick up where you left off through online play.



Disney – Villainous

Publisher Wonder Forge **Rating** 10+

Disneyphiles need look no further for their ideal holiday activity. Villainous flips the classic narrative focus on its head, putting each player in charge of a specific baddie from one of its classic films. Captain Hook, Jafar, Maleficent, Prince John, Queen of Hearts, and Ursula all have their own dastardly goals to complete as they consolidate power and take over their respective realms. But even as you enact your nefarious plot, you must fend off the other villains at the table with you, who will unleash the heroes from your own movie to slow you down. Beautifully illustrated card art recalls the beloved films, and the asymmetric competition adds tons of replay value as you learn each wicked character's strengths and weaknesses. A good-natured competitive streak required.

Pokémon
Trading Card Game
Sun & Moon Lost Thunder
10 Additional Game Cards
6+

Pokémon Trading Card Game: Sun & Moon – Lost Thunder

Publisher The Pokémon Company International **Rating** 6+

The Pokémon Trading Card Game has been running for two decades, but the scene continues to grow. The recent Lost Thunder expansion adds more than 200 new cards spanning the existing seven generations of monsters. Pick up the two theme decks starring Entei and Raikou for instant and balanced playability, or steadily build your collection through booster packs or the premium Elite Trainer Box. Since these are all a part of the Pokémon Trading Card Game, you can combine the cards you get from this expansion with any other Pokémon cards you already own to create decks that are both fun and cater to your preferred playstyle.

Call of Duty: Black Ops 4

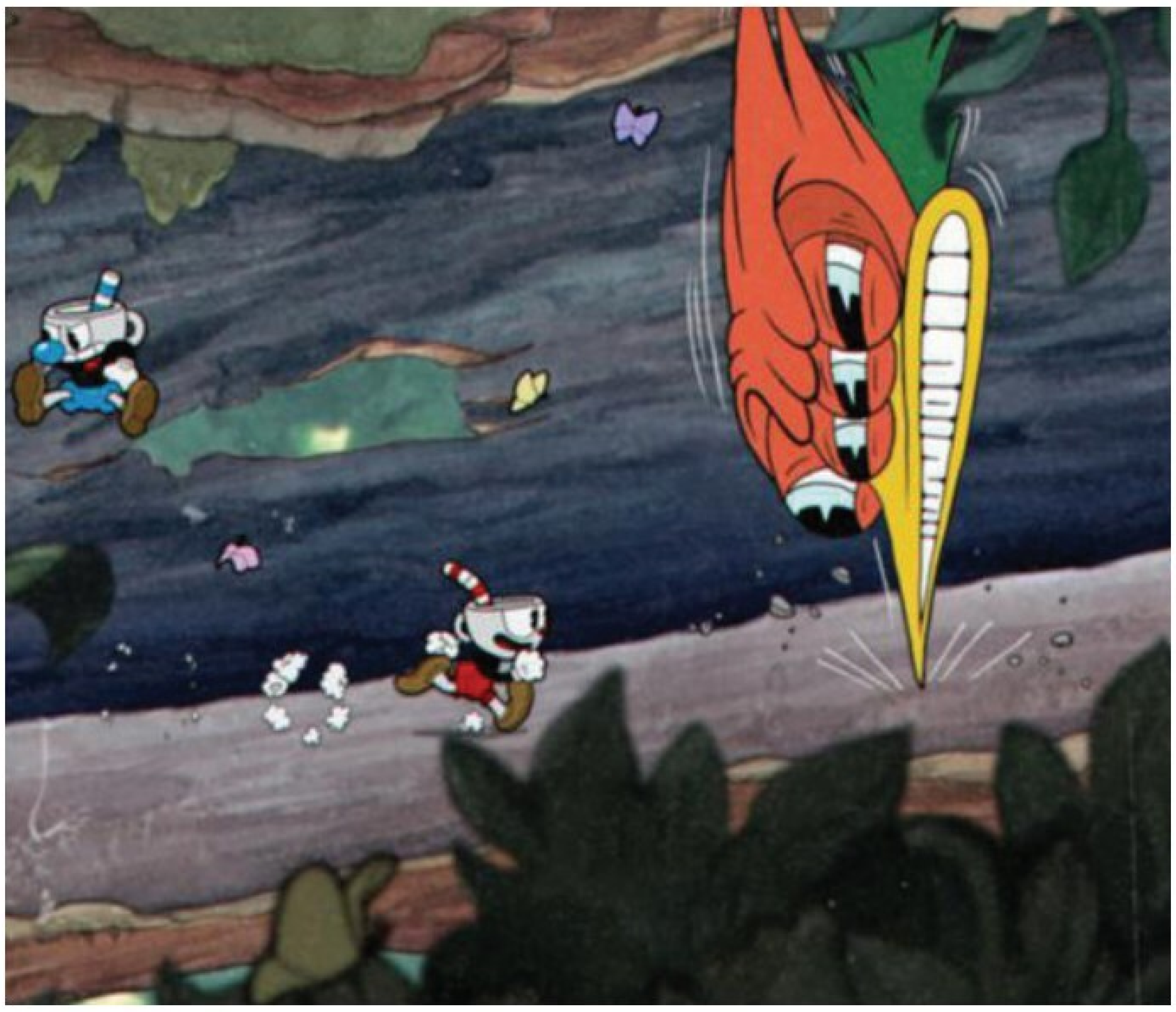
Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC **Rating** M

Call of Duty: Black Ops 4 is all about playing together. Not only does it get rid of the series' traditional single-player campaign, but its three main modes are about cooperation or competition. The tense and blazing hot Blackout mode is among the best battle royale experiences out there, while Treyarch's take on cooperative play in zombies continues to be the gold standard for that style of modes. Black Ops 4 also features the standard Call of Duty competitive multiplayer suite. While you can play all of these modes online through matchmaking, you can also head into war together through local splitscreen multiplayer.

Diablo III

Platform PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PS3, Xbox 360, PC, Mac **Rating** M

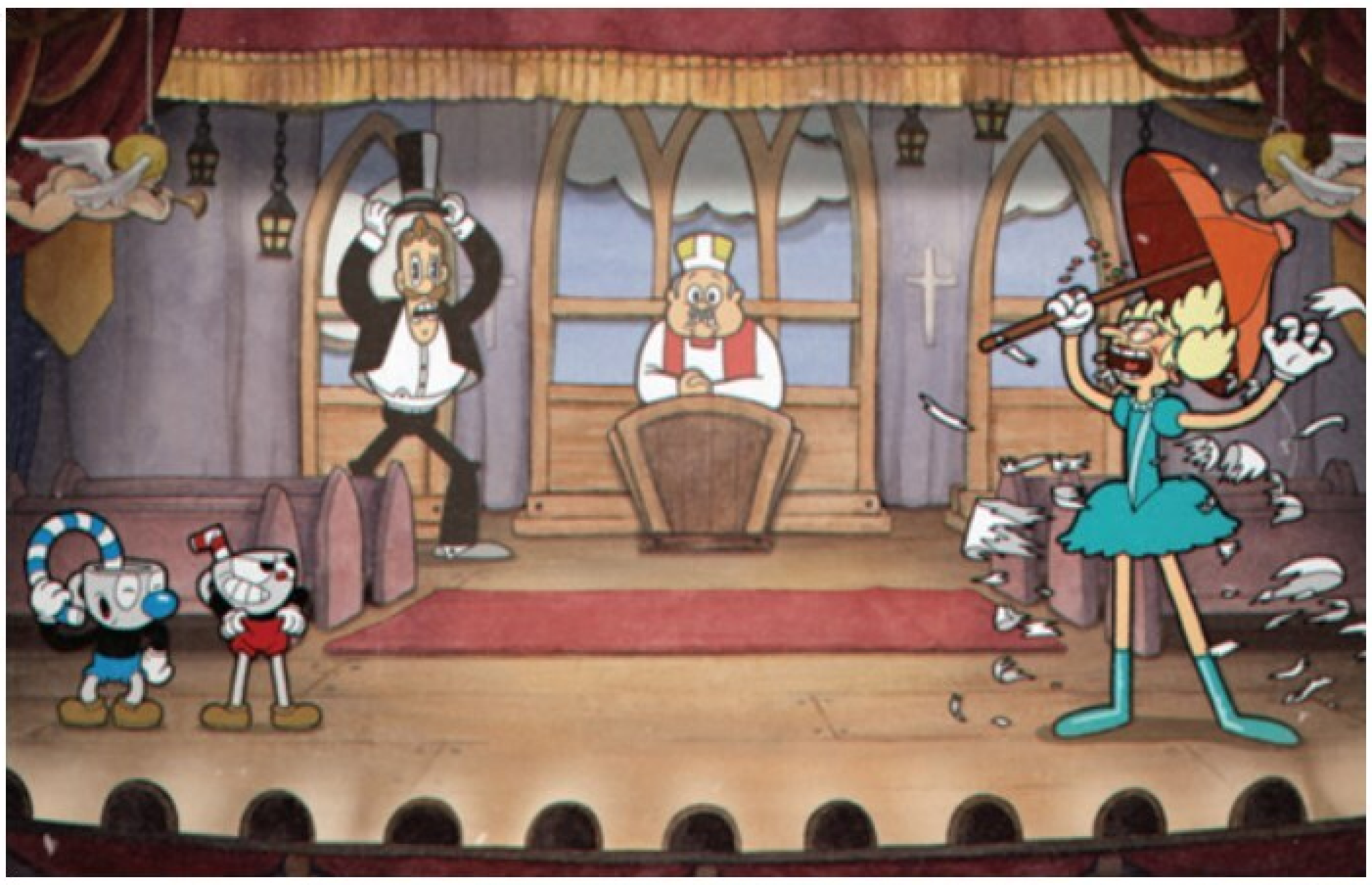
Dungeon crawling has never been better or more accessible than it is in Diablo III. The recent Eternal Collection not only features the Reaper of Souls and Rise of the Necromancer expansions, but brings it to the Nintendo Switch, making it the most portable version of Diablo III to date. Don't let any lingering negative thoughts from the game's rocky 2012 launch scare you away; this is one of the greatest dungeon-crawling games ever released. All these years later, fighting demons with friends in local co-op is still a blast.

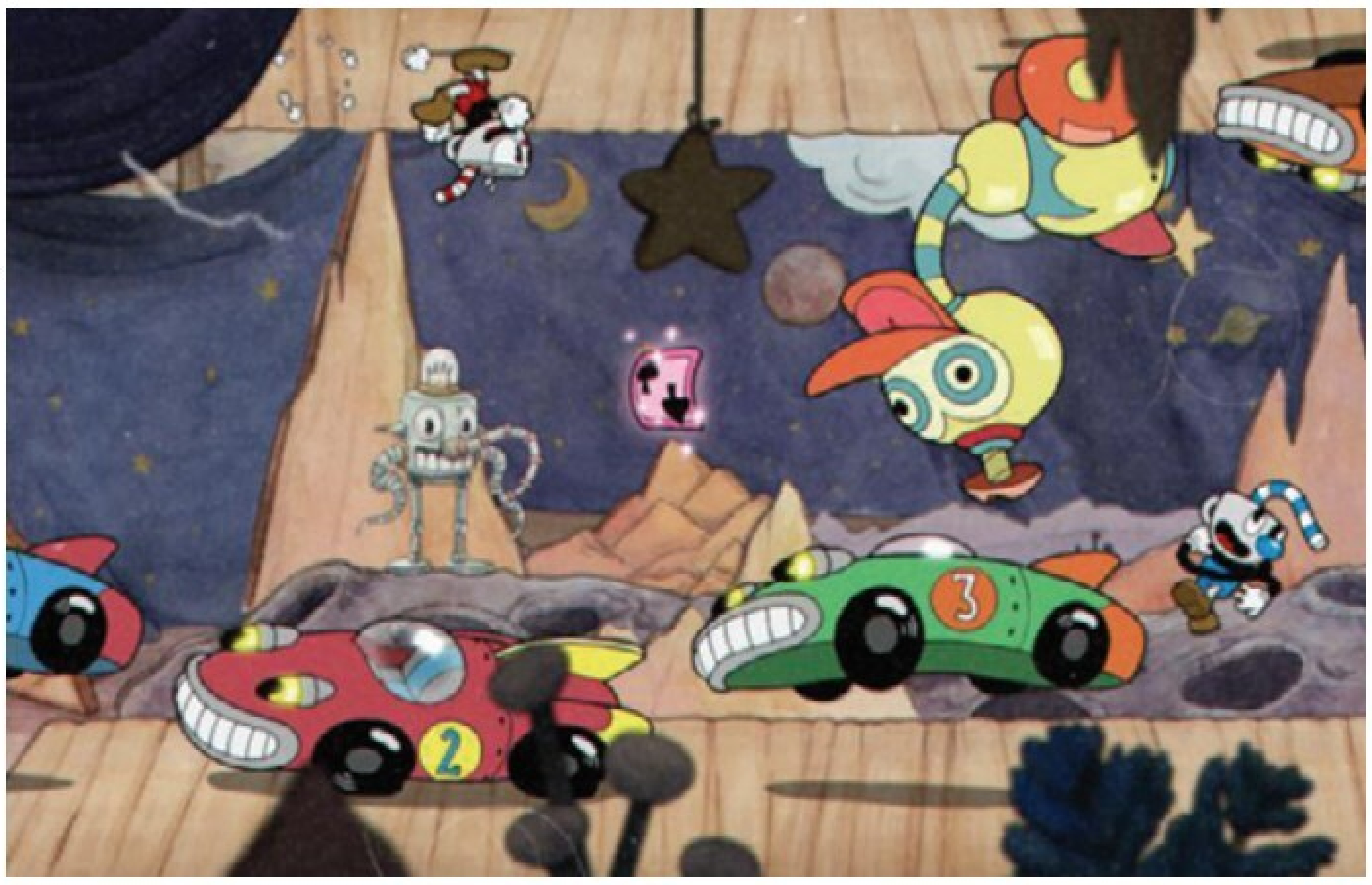


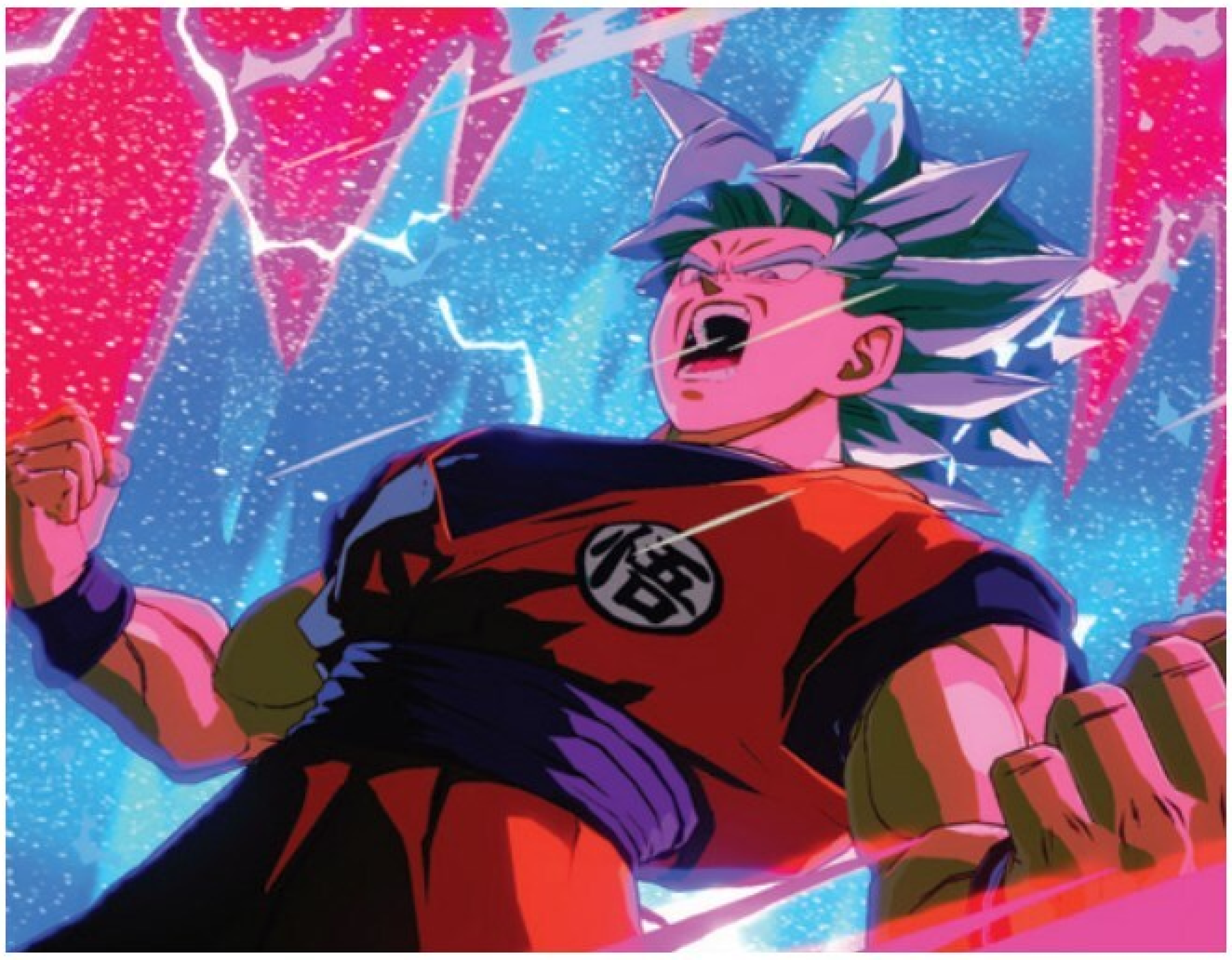
Cuphead

Platform Xbox One, PC, Mac **Rating** E10+

While some of the other games on this list are accessible games that anyone can join in and have fun with, Cuphead is the game you bring if you have another hardcore gamer in your presence. Anyone can appreciate the 1930s-inspired art style, but you need some serious skills to make any progress in this 2D action game from Studio MDHR. Even if your friends and family aren't quite up to your skill level, the controls are easy to understand and there's plenty of maddening fun awaiting you in the always-daunting and often-complex boss battles.







Dragon Ball FighterZ

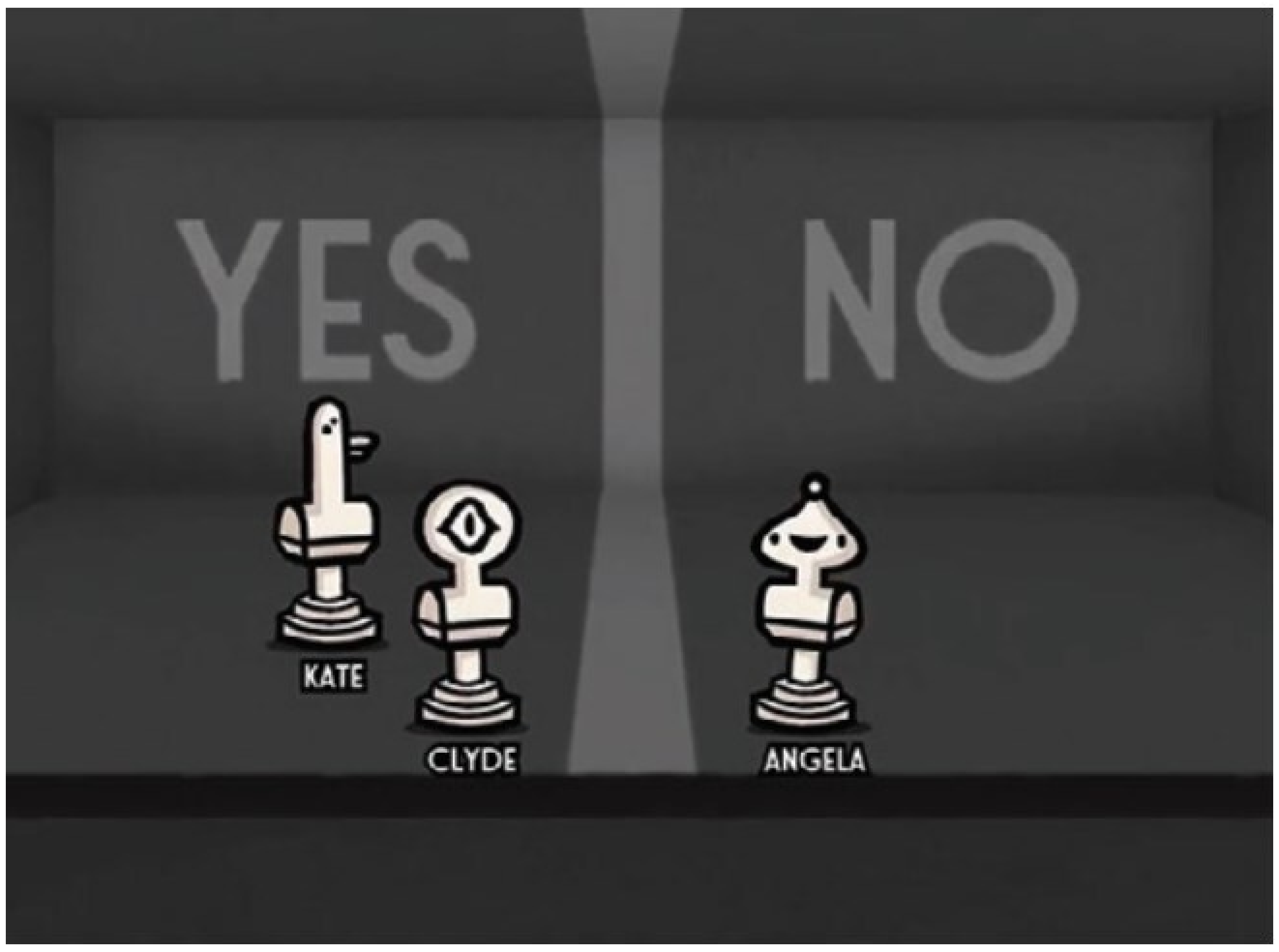
Platform PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC **Rating** T

The Dragon Ball series has seen its share of video game adaptations, but Dragon Ball FighterZ is the flashiest and most mechanically sound game the beloved anime has ever seen. In addition to a long single-player story, Dragon Ball FighterZ helps you settle any family differences by letting you go Super Saiyan and (digitally) beat the tar out of each other. Featuring a wide range of recognizable Dragon Ball characters, ranging from mainstays like Goku, Vegeta, and Piccolo to deeper cuts like Captain Ginyu and Android 16, Dragon Ball FigherZ has something for die-hard and casual fans alike. Add to that the fact that it's one of the best fighters from the last few years and you have a sure bet for a good time.

Rocket League

Platform PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC, Mac, Linux **Rating** E

"You're playing soccer with rocket cars" is perhaps an oversimplification of what Rocket League is and what makes it so great, but at the end of the day, you're playing soccer with rocket cars. Tearing around a big field, chasing a giant ball in cars that can boost, flip, and even drive up walls is fun from the opening horn. The pick-up-and-play controls make it a breeze for anyone to get up and running. Scoring a goal in the middle of the frantic action is another thing all together, but as they say, "practice makes perfect." It takes some work to become good at Rocket League, but once you're able to line up a shot and volley it in, it's one of the more rewarding and fun team multiplayer games out there.



The Jackbox Party Pack 5

Platform PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC, Mac, Linux, iOS **Rating** T

The Jackbox games have been crowd pleasers ever since the first entry of You Don't Know Jack debuted in 2011. The fifth Jackbox Party Pack brings an all-new version of You Don't Know Jack, as well as four other riotously funny games. Whether you're competing in that signature trivia game or spitting verses back and forth in freestyle rap battles with Mad Verse City, you're all but guaranteed to have a smile on your face. Split The Room and Patently Stupid are also winners in this pack, as you try to come up with difficult decisions that will give you the most polarizing responses or create hilarious fill-in-the-blank scenarios. The best part about Jackbox Party Pack games is you don't need a bunch of controllers to get everyone involved; all you need is a smartphone and you're good to go.

Super Mario Party

Platform Switch **Rating** E

With so many chance elements at play, Super Mario Party may not be the best showcase of skill, but that's kind of what helps make it such a great game for gamers of all ages and skill levels. With 80 all-new, mostly fun minigames, this is the perfect way to get everyone gaming. Super Mario Party gives you multiple ways to consume its centerpiece minigames, from the cooperative River Survival mode to the quick-hit, rhythm-based Sound Stage mode. When all else fails, jumping into a standard board-game Mario Party match is fun for anyone, or you can cut straight to the meat of the experience with several dedicated minigame modes.

ICEBERG LOUNGE

Lego DC Super-Villains

Platform PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC **Rating** E10+

TT Games' Lego titles are usually entertaining to platform through with a friend, but the new Lego DC Super-Villains is one of the best games the series has ever seen. After creating your own villain, you explore the world alongside various iconic villains from DC Comics like Joker, Harley Quinn, and Lex Luthor. Full of cute, hilarious, and fun moments, Lego DC Super-Villains is a journey better experienced with a friend who will laugh along with you. Add to that the fact that this is TT Games' most refined and improved adventure in a long time and it's a safe bet you'll have fun in this entry.

Rising Starlord

Developer Other Ocean and Tested modernize an arcade classic

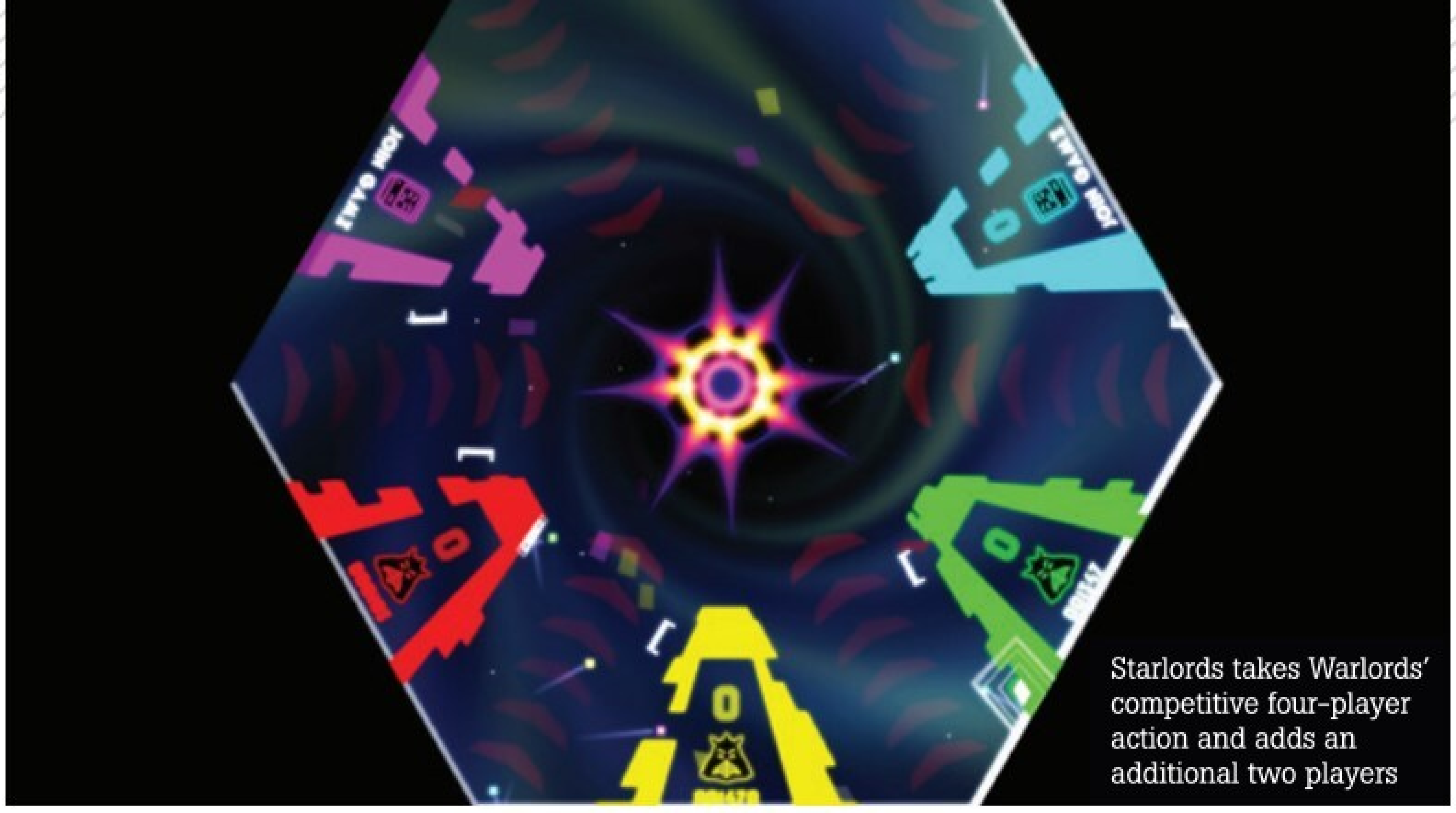
by Ben Reeves

In 1980, Atari launched Warlords, a four-player arcade game that took elements from Pong and Breakout to create a competitive experience. Players took turns volleying flaming balls back and forth to protect the home base that represented their castle. At its release, Warlords was a moderate success, but over the years it amassed a committed fan following that has enthusiastically built a series of homebrew sequels.

"Anyone who's ever played Warlords knows that it's a really fun game," says Mike Mika, studio head of Digital Eclipse and Other Ocean Interactive. "It stands the test of time. Every time we see a Warlords cabinet at an arcade show, it always draws a big crowd."

So when the folks at Tested.com approached Other Ocean about creating a new arcade game, Mika felt a spiritual successor to Atari's Warlords was a no-brainer. Over the course of several months, the two companies prototyped different designs. Tested built several models for the game's outer shell, its plywood cabinet, and mechanical interface, while Other Ocean programmed the actual game.

"Part of our process was to walk in the footsteps of our video game predecessors, and experience what it was like for designers back in the '80s and '90s," Mika says. "We were throwing the same questions at ourselves,



Starlords takes Warlords' competitive four-player action and adds an additional two players

like, 'How do we get people to want to repeat play?' 'How do we get the cabinet through a door?' and even 'How do we prevent people from spilling things on it?'"

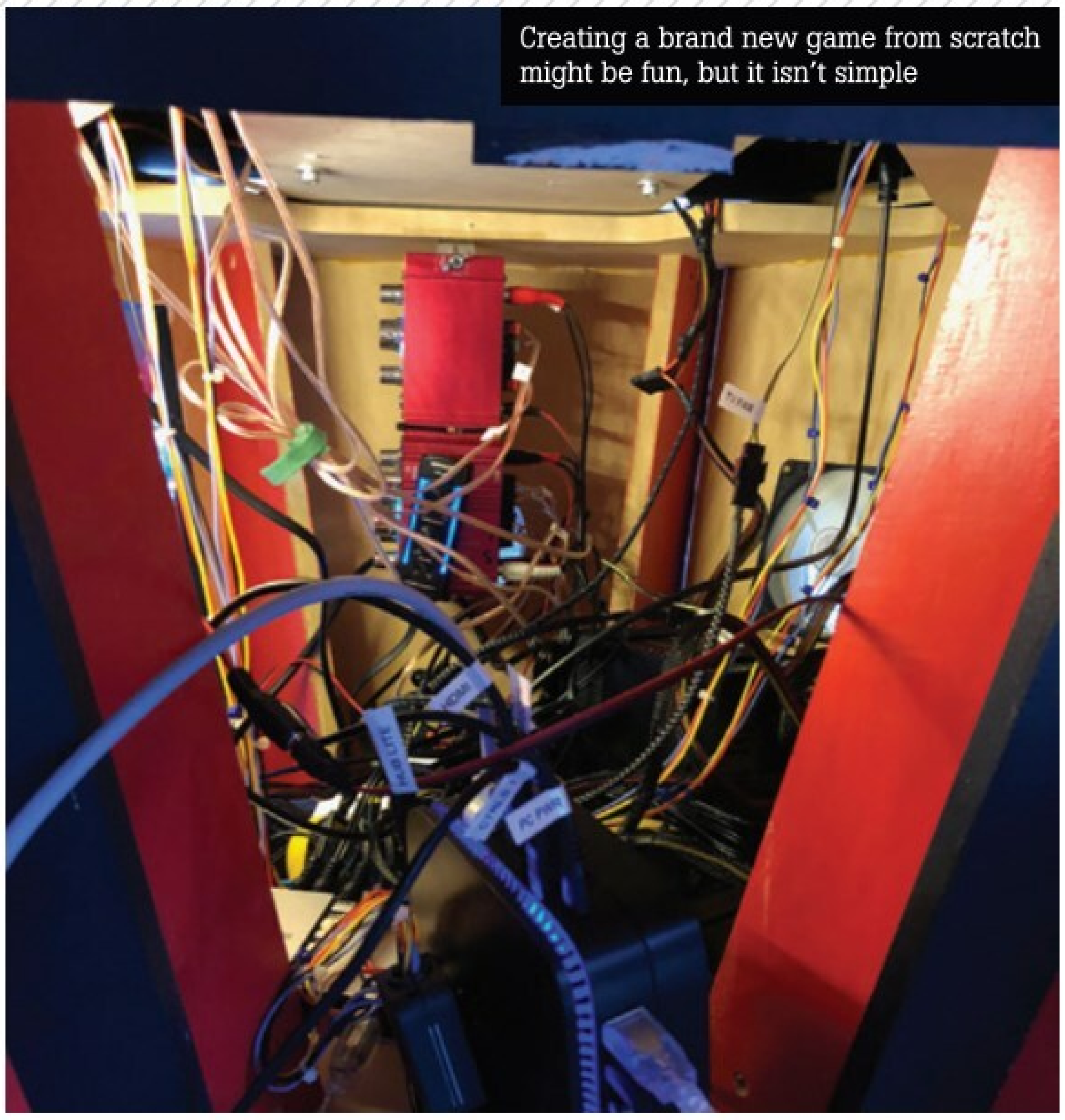
The two companies knew they wanted to do something special with their Warlord successor and experimented with wild ideas like placing the game inside a round screen, giving players power-ups, or adding a castle to the center of the playfield. Ultimately, the designers settled on a hexagonal playfield that allowed up to six players to huddle around the screen at once.

"We were originally thinking about a fantasy-style table, but we came back to the idea of, if we were Atari, and we were designing an official sequel back then, what would we have done?" Mika says. "It made sense to move towards sci-fi. We asked, 'How would Atari try to one-up themselves?' I think they would have done the same thing."

The finished cocktail-style cabinet features a retro sci-fi aesthetic that feels like a cross between classic *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who*. A hexagonal mask cleverly disguises a standard 16:9 flat screen television used for the display. The team at Tested struggled to find some of the cabinet's unique parts, so many components – including its control paddles – were 3D printed. Other Ocean also spent a lot of effort reiterating the pie-shaped wedges that represented each player's home base.

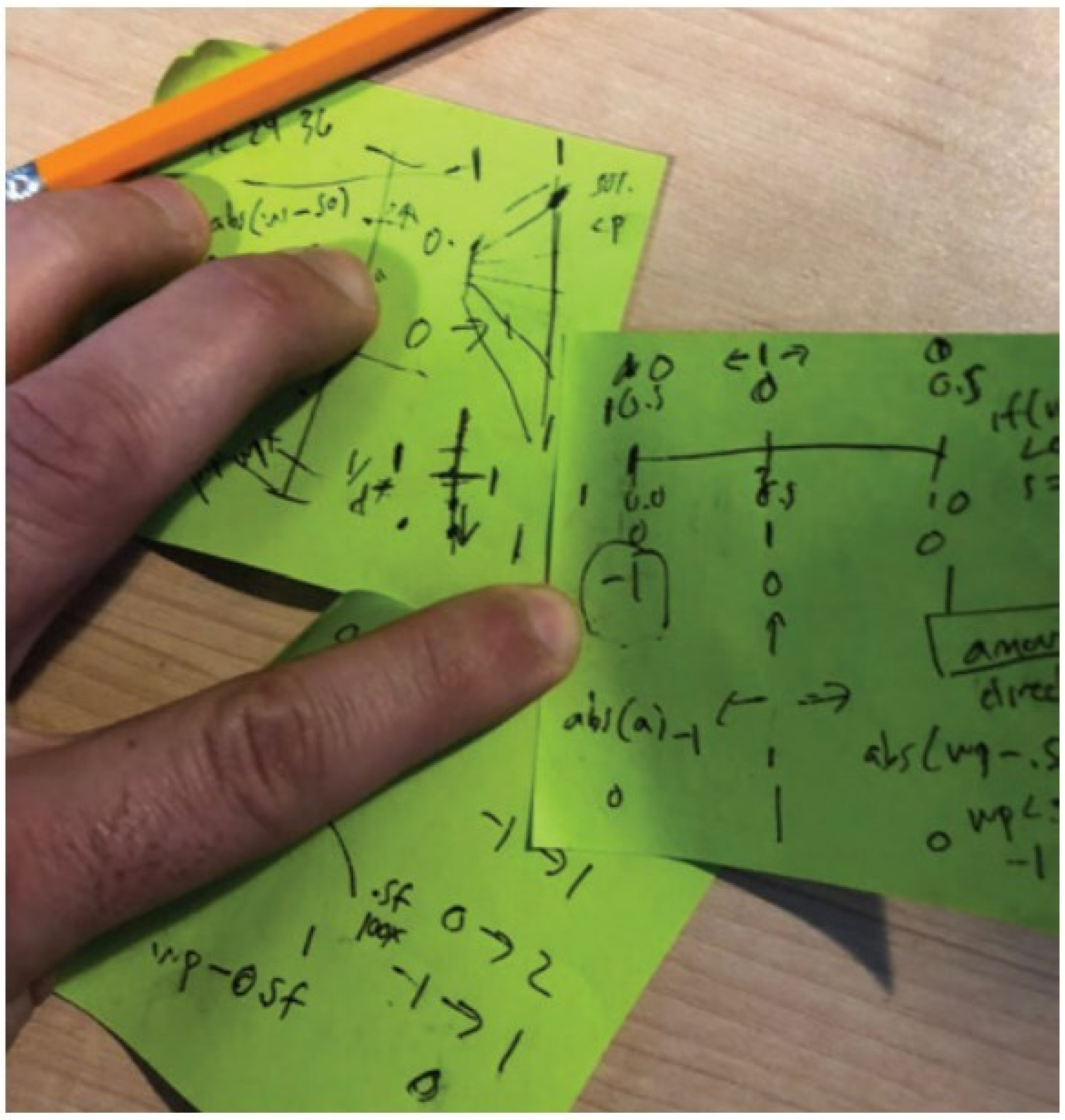
"It came together better than I thought, but there were challenges," Mika explains. "In Warlords, there is this perfectly mirrored playfield, but since we added two more players that messed things up. There was a lot of math trying to figure out how to get the best gameplay. Warlords features a lot of broadside action where you have battles with people adjacent to you. But with six players, we had to figure out the right angles that allowed for the same kind of play. That was really hard. We went through so many iterations."

Starlords debuted at the 2018 California Extreme classic arcade games show, and Other Ocean continued tweaking the mechanics – such as the speed of the ball and its size – up until the day of its debut. As of press time, only one cabinet has been built, but Tested and Other Ocean are in talks with manufacturers about the possibility of a wider release, and Other Ocean hopes to eventually release the game digitally for free online. Those who are interested in knowing more about Starlords can track its show schedule on Other Ocean's website or watch Tested's online documentary series. ◆



Creating a brand new game from scratch might be fun, but it isn't simple

Jeremy Williams and Sean Charlesworth of Tested assemble the Starlords cabinet for the first time



Looking Toward The Game Streaming Future

The promise of online video game streaming is a beautiful, utopian dream where any title can be played regardless of hardware constraints. Being able to play the best-looking, most technologically advanced video games on anything that can maintain a decent internet connection is an undeniably attractive proposition, and we've never been closer to it than we are today. But just how close are we to making this happen, and do the upcoming options show promise? To examine these questions, we tried two of the leading streaming services currently in beta from Google and Nvidia.

by Kyle Hilliard

Streaming video is the way we absorb entertainment media today. We stream most of our television shows and movies from myriad online services and there is little to complain about, but video games are different. A sudden, unexpected dip in quality can drastically affect your experience. If you're playing against others online, the match can become unplayable if you experience lag. This is why streaming a video game online is difficult. If your total control over the experience is not consistently maintained, then the illusion is shattered.

Despite the difficulty streaming a game online proposes, plenty of companies are interested in giving it a shot. Sony already offers the PlayStation Now service, which lets players stream games from previous generations to their PlayStation 4. Nintendo has limited streaming options already in place in Japan on the Switch for games like Resident Evil 7. Microsoft announced Project xCloud, which will let you stream Xbox games to your platform of choice, including your phone, and even subtly teased a streaming future for its next-generation hardware plans. For PC games, both Google and Nvidia are experimenting with Project Stream and GeForce Now respectively as a way to give access to the most technically advanced games on nearly any internet-connected device.

Nvidia GeForce Now

Nvidia's service lets you play games you already own from a few different game-selling platforms. In the future, when the service is available publicly, you will have remote access to your Steam library, for example, from any PC, Mac, or Nvidia Shield local streaming device.

We tried it out a few different ways: over high- and low-speed wi-fi on a Macbook, and with a wired connection on a desktop PC. The lowest speed we tested was about 13 MB on a laptop and the stream was expectedly rough. Playing Half-Life 2 over the network lowered the resolution significantly, and the frame-rate flip-flopped between 30 and 60 FPS depending on the connection.

In a stronger wifi network, ranging between 40 MB and 60 MB download speeds, it fared much better. Half-Life 2 maintained its resolution and 60 FPS framerate consistently with only a few intermittent resolution drops. It seems the service values gameplay speed over resolution and will sacrifice the latter first when necessary, which is smart. Unsurprisingly, the wired desktop PC (with 100 MB download speeds) fared best. I played Super Meat Boy, as few games require such speed and accuracy, and it was… okay. I made it through the first world and defeated the boss without too much trouble, but when comparing it to playing Super Meat Boy straight off the hard drive, there is no denying the stream had a small amount of lag.

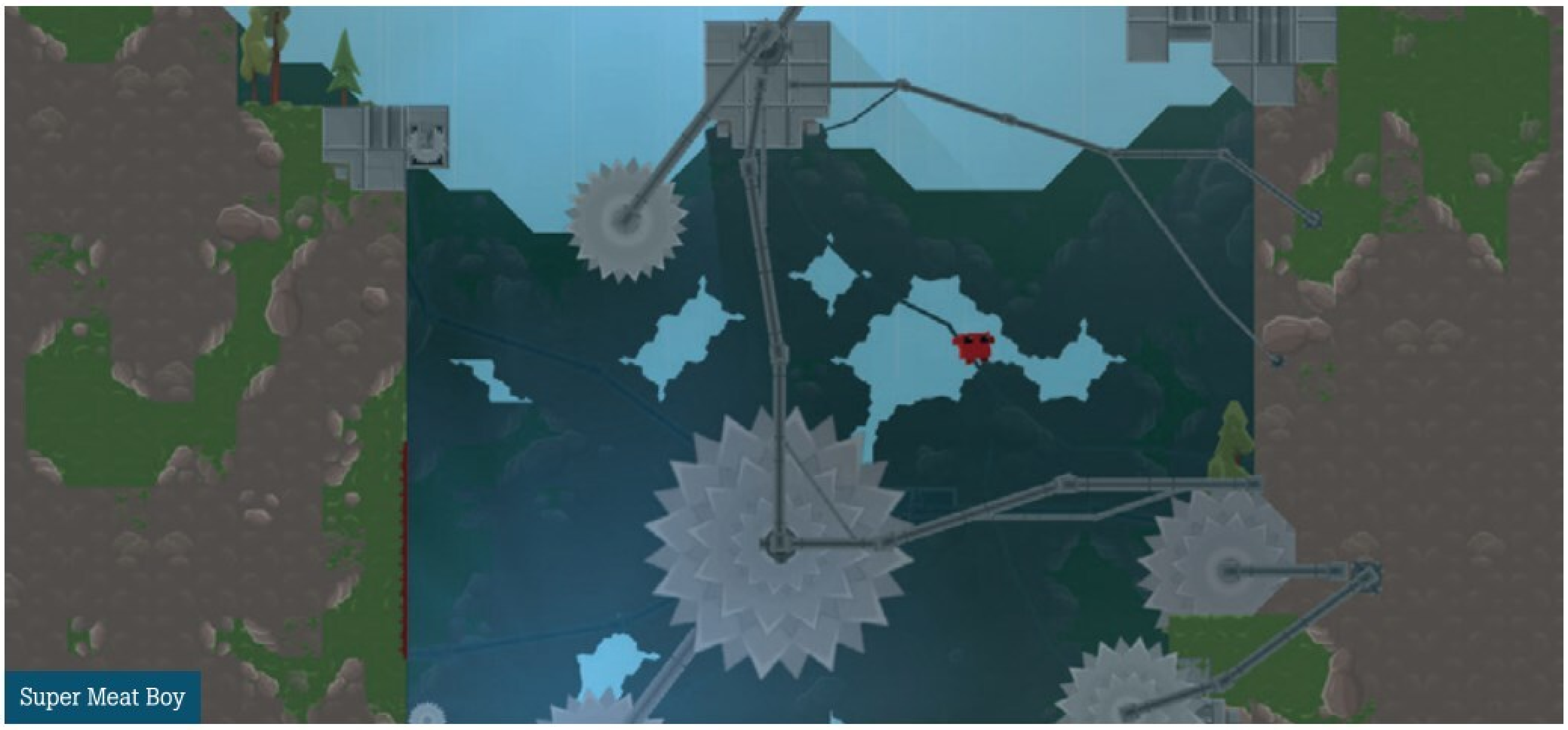
Overall, Nvidia's service is impressive. At this state, it simply can't compete with local gaming, but it gets the job done. Games like Super Meat Boy or Cuphead are at a noticeable disadvantage. Online titles I tested, like Fortnite and Left 4 Dead 2, played well. So did other offline games like Half-Life 2 and Shenmue HD. The strongest games are the ones fully supported by the service. Left 4 Dead 2, for example, was instantly available to play after clicking play. More obscure games like Hollow Knight have to be downloaded to the GeForce servers before I could play, even though it was happening remotely.

Nvidia had no details to offer about when the service will leave beta or how much it will cost, but the beta is currently free if you are selected to participate.

How Does It Work?

The short answer is: It's complicated. The longer (but still simplified) answer is that you're basically remotely controlling a computer and streaming video of your gameplay to your computer. Google's process is a little more ambiguous and it didn't have a direct answer for us regarding exactly how it works, but Nvidia says, "GeForce Now gives you access to a gaming rig in the cloud where the games are rendered and you play remotely through the client app." Internet speeds have gotten to a point where this action is feasible today, but in the past when we were still mostly working in single-digit downloads speed, it simply wasn't possible.

Half-Life 2



Super Meat Boy

Google's Project Stream
There are far more question marks when it comes to Project Stream, Google's video game streaming service. For the beta, Project Stream is only offering one game for testing: Assassin's Creed Odyssey. We asked Google what to expect in terms of release, pricing, and how you will be able to purchase games, but it was not able to provide answers. Currently, after getting into Project Stream's beta, you open a link on a Chrome browser and you play Assassin's Creed Odyssey.

Overall, Project Stream seems more stable than Nvidia's service, but it also has far fewer variables to contend with. There is only one game available, and if you're not hitting a certain download speed threshold it will not let you play. I put about 10 hours into Assassin's Creed Odyssey, testing the same way I did with Nvidia's service, and arrived at the same conclusion: It's promising. Resolution will drop before framerate, which is smart. When you have a solid connection (like streaming in strong wifi on a MacBook or on a wired desktop PC like I was), there are surprisingly few indicators you are streaming a game online.

Is Streaming The Future?
At this stage, the full potential of streaming is tough to predict. But after spending time with GeForce Now and Project Stream, I can say they exceeded my expectation. The pros are impressive: You can play any game from any device that has a decent internet connection (even phones in the future) and despite data being traded while you're streaming/playing, it will likely be less than the amount of data required to download a large game and its myriad patches. For those with stifling data caps uninterested in paying huge sums of money for frequent hardware upgrades, streaming may be their future.

But there is no denying streaming's current disadvantages, which I don't see being fully overcome by the time these services leave beta. The lag is usually small, but it exists, and even the strongest internet connections dip periodically. The best way to play a game for now and in the foreseeable future remains playing it off your hard drive, and the fastest internet connection won't change that. Sony realized that earlier this year resulting in an option to download games being added to its Now streaming service.

Streaming games this way also tips ownership further out of the hands of the consumer and deeper into the hands of the content owners. Instant access to games from any platform means fewer personal ownership rights over the content, but for many, it's a trade that will be worth making. If a game you love suddenly disappears from your library, though, there won't be much you can do about it – just like how your favorite movie can suddenly disappear from Netflix without warning.

For now, it is up in the air (or maybe the cloud). Streaming is an exciting technology that works well with some caveats. It's an attractive, alternate option for playing video games in the future, but much in the same way the film industry still maintains a healthy network of movie theatres despite streaming options at home, it's not the best to play a video game. Just a hopefully lower-priced, serviceable alternative. ◆

Hollow Knight

ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY

Assassin's Creed Odyssey is not a typical installment in this popular series. Ubisoft Quebec took risks with the formula, like setting it prior to the formation of the Assassins and Templars, and not letting players use the signature hidden blade. These risks appear to have paid off, since Assassin's Creed Odyssey had the series' best launch of this console generation in terms of sales. We talked to game director Scott Phillips about this success, touching on how the tough choices were made, what didn't make the cut, and what fans can expect in the future. *by Joe Juba*

Warning: This interview contains spoilers for Assassin's Creed Odyssey.

Conventional wisdom is that male protagonists are overwhelmingly more popular. Has that been true with Odyssey? What's the Alexios/Kassandra split?
Right now, it's two-thirds Alexios and one-third Kassandra. The interesting thing is that, during playtests, it was pretty much 50/50. I was a bit surprised; I was expecting half-and-half or even a little bit more Kassandra. The idea of choice being key to our game shows really well in that even we are surprised by some of the choices ended up making.

Around launch, the progression was a discussion partially because of the XP-boosting microtransactions. If a player does have problems with the pacing, is that a problem with the balance you deliberately struck, rather than a larger mandate to drive players toward microtransactions?
Absolutely. During all of those playtests, all of the internal playtests we had, every time the team played the game, none of those boosters were available to players. So what we balanced based on all of the feedback we gathered is what we felt was a good pacing for the game to give the player the best experience of the world, of the quests, of the POIs [people of interest], of the exploration. It was the experience we wanted.

Was there anything you really wanted to include that ended up on the cutting room floor?
We had tried initially to do more with what we internally called the "world logic," which was the leaders and the factions of Athens and Sparta. Initially, there was more to that. There were deeper relationships with the leaders, more that you could make choices about. But as we went, we realized it would end up competing with how much quest content there was. The game was already so big that asking the player to be deeply involved in more things was just not going to work out.

The addition of love interests is a good step for the series, but none of them feel like particularly meaningful relationships to the hero. Is that intentional?
For me, the idea was, yes, you're playing an Assassin's Creed game. And yes, you're going around stabbing lots of people. But we wanted to make an RPG, and an RPG is about giving players interesting choices that real people can relate to. Not a whole lot of players – thankfully – can relate to stabbing and killing thousands of people. But most every person can relate to some sort of relationship or romance or connection with someone of the same or opposite gender. So, it was like, "We need to really include more of what being a human is in an RPG." In terms of how far we went with some of them, yeah, I think there's more we could do, more we should do going forward with those romances… that is something we've taken to heart with the DLC and something people can watch for with the story packs. That's something we've learned from and will improve going forward.

In Atlantis, Layla learns that the hero – Alexios or Kassandra – has been alive all this time. What's the hero been doing since the days of Ancient Greece?
That, we can't really say. But they've clearly been around. Since 2,500 years ago, they've clearly been doing other things, and that's something we wanted to leave as a question mark and leave ourselves some possibilities for how they might be used in anything else. I think it's a cool idea to have them still be around, and have them potentially experienced many other events or time periods, or having affected things throughout history. I think it leaves a lot of opportunities and mystery.

Because this game happens before any of the other ones, it's not impossible that character could have had a hand in events that Assassin's Creed fans have played already?
Yes, that's not impossible. ◆

MEGA MAN 11

After an eight-year hiatus, Mega Man is back to foil Dr. Wily's evil schemes. Capcom smartly updated the graphics and added some clever new mechanics while also remaining impressively faithful to the series' roots. We chatted with producer Kazuhiro Tsuchiya to gain more insight into how Capcom pulled off this seemingly trying task.

by Ben Reeves

The game opens with young versions of Light and Wily. Why did you feel that backstory was important?
Since Mega Man 11 is the first new Mega Man title in eight years, we wanted series newcomers to easily understand the story and characters' backgrounds. For the long-time fans, we wanted to incorporate an untold episode in the doctors' history that would leave fans smiling.

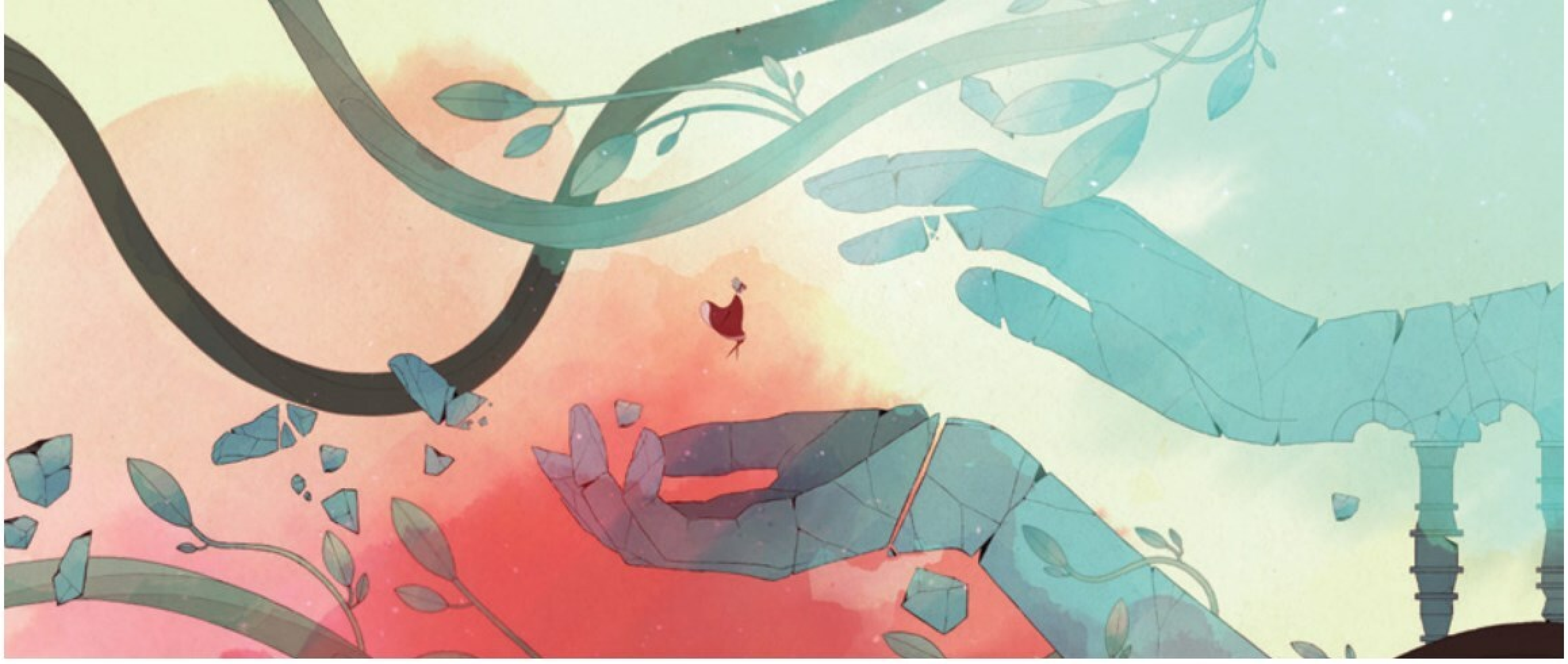
Bounce Man has one of the most interesting levels in a Mega Man game. How did his stage come together?
The idea was to create an exhilarating stage with walls made of rubber where Mega Man can bounce around and skillfully use his surroundings to super jump to new heights, even if the controls are a bit challenging. We completed the Double Gear System around the time we were developing Bounce Man's stage, so we tuned the level in such a way that players can see and assess how game controls work, even if using the Speed Gear is tough.

A lot of modern games have moved away from a lives-based system. Why did the team decide to hold on to that classic formula?
One thing that makes Mega Man games fun is the fact that you can try stages over and over again, as well as that sense of improvement you feel when difficult stages and formidable bosses become easier to take down. That said, retrying an uncompleted stage or challenge in an action game requires players to increase their focus, right? When someone with decreased focus uses unlimited retries on a difficult quest, the experience can be painful, especially when it comes to action games. Additionally, one major characteristic of the Mega Man series is that players who are stuck on a certain stage can clear other levels and use the special weapons they obtain to get past roadblocks more easily. If you think about all of these aspects together, keeping the lives-based system serves as a means for players to reset their focus and create strategies for various stages.

During our cover-story trip, you said you were considering making the Robot Masters' weaknesses make logical sense. Is there still a logic to their order?
We placed a lot of emphasis on creating Robot Masters and weapons with attributes that everyone – young gamers included – can comprehend based on real-life knowledge. As for Robot Masters' weaknesses, there are of course pairings that match players' assumptions based on real-life knowledge, but we also included some combinations that might throw players off and make them think for a bit. Regarding Tundra Man's weakness, Blazing Torch makes logical sense, but this boss' weakness is also a tribute to Mega Man 1. [Tundra Man is weak to thunder much like Ice Man from the original game.]

Mega Man does not pause in mid-air when leaping through boss doors. Was that an intentional decision? Were you surprised by the stir that created online?
There are areas in Mega Man 11 that are connected by horizontal shutters placed in the floor. If players were to slide onto the shutter, for example, they would then fall into the area below in the same pose, which would be unnatural. In order to unify movement through horizontal shutters and vertical shutters, we decided to reset Mega Man's movement before he passes through each of these doors.

Do you think that Dr. Wily is secretly a good guy?
If you think about how the world would be if Dr. Wily achieved his mission for world domination, I think that we'd be living in a surprisingly enjoyable place. Either that or the world wouldn't be too different from what it is now.

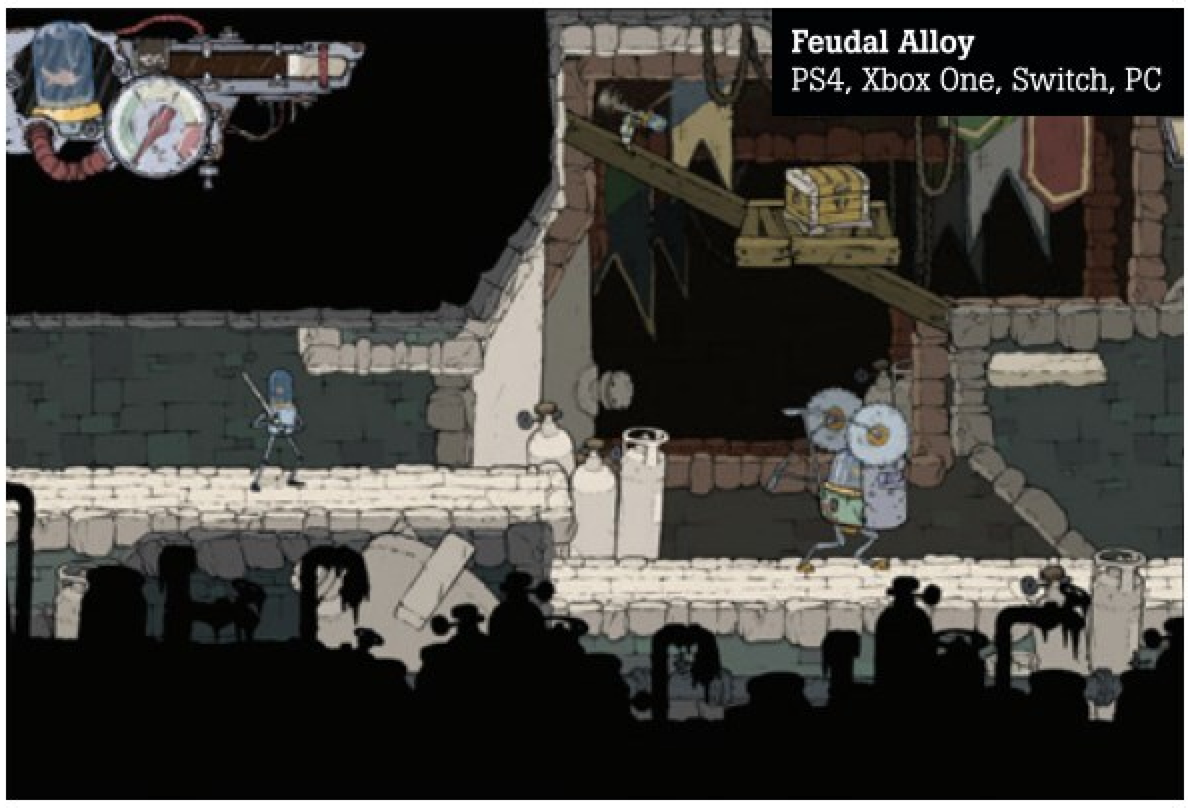


New Twists On The Classic Platformer

I grew up on 2D platformers, and watched them mature and evolve into the many varieties on the market today. But it still astounds me how much innovation is possible within the genre, with creative developers exploring new mechanics, artistic designs, and novel approaches to progression. ***by Matt Miller***

Gris (shown above) comes to us from Nomada Studio, a small group that formed with the express purpose of bringing life to the dreamlike art of Conrad Roset. His watercolor-esque aesthetic is on display in the soft but lush visuals of the studio's first game. Across a couple of hours of play, I was repeatedly blown away by the visual presentation, as each frame of movement and animated color felt like it could be freeze-framed and hung on a gallery wall. A sensual, melancholy soundtrack accompanies the otherwise quiet flow of play, which juxtaposes stretches of uncomplicated running and jumping with occasional light puzzles.

The game follows a girl as her world shatters around her, plunging her into a series of surreal landscapes of broken columns, hidden undergrounds, and submerged pools. With little in the way of overt storytelling, the experience takes on the qualities of an allegory about pain and loss. Gris means "gray" in French and Spanish, and we follow the girl's journey as her surroundings move from a colorless monotone toward sudden splashes of new color and life.



Feudal Alloy
PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC

As she moves through the world, her willowy dress takes on new shapes and abilities, usually to let her better surmount some new challenge, like swimming into a darkened lake, or standing her ground against the heavy wind. Even so, the gameplay and puzzles rarely slow down the flow of beautiful landscapes and ideas. Following in the footsteps of games like Journey, Nomada is far more interested in communicating emotions and experience than in offering deep mechanics. I was certainly moved by what I encountered in Gris; watch for a final release in December on Switch and PC.

Attu Games is the two-person development outfit behind **Feudal Alloy**, a fascinating indie platformer more innovative than it first appears. You play a friendly robot (with a goldfish in a fishbowl for a head, for some reason) who runs a community for retired robots, ensuring they get the oil they need to stay lubricated. Someone steals the oil, and you must journey to get it back through a medieval world that feels happily at odds with its machine inhabitants.

With its herky-jerky robotic animations and simple jumping and slashing action, Feudal Alloy doesn't immediately impress. But after I spent a few minutes getting to know the systems, level designs, and quirky aesthetic, I started to come around. Your robot has a constantly active heat gauge. Wildly swing your sword too much, and you overheat and lose access to your attacks (like a stamina meter), so you have to be judicious in your approach. You don't lose health as enemy automatons knock you around, but you do lose oil, so you regularly must pop your head open and douse your parts with more oil. As you level up and explore, your entire body is interchangeable in pieces, and those parts are reflected visually. Eventually, your character's whole body looks different than when it started, with a ramshackle mix of legs, arms, chest, and head.

Feudal Alloy's levels recall the circuitous routes of Metroid, in which you descend through a series of corridors and rooms, finding hidden chambers, uncovering treasures, and gaining access to new bombs and potions that let you progress into new areas and shortcuts. In between descents, I could return to a shopkeeper, and spend some currency to get better weapons, armor, and items, many of which allow me to customize my playstyle; do I want to do more damage in a single hit, or have my heat gauge go up at a slower rate? With a variety of stats to play with, it helped me to feel engaged in the progression loop. Beyond equipment, I'm also slowly leveling up and gaining new skills and buffs for my spindly robot.

The jaunty tunes and familiar medieval setting belie a deeper game than I first expected, and I'm curious whether that depth continues into the later hours of play. I shouldn't have long to wait; Feudal Alloy is aiming for release on PS4, Xbox One, Switch, and PC in January.

SONY
PlayStation
RESET

L
R
SONY
PlayStation
SELECT
START

PLAYSTATION CLASSIC REVIEW

Repeating the past

by Joe Juba

No single company has the market cornered on nostalgia. In the last two years, Nintendo enjoyed positive fan response to its NES and SNES mini-consoles, and now Sony is tapping into a similar vein with the PlayStation Classic. This plug-and-play novelty console mines Sony's history to bring gamers a fond look back at a bygone era, but is the trip down memory lane worthwhile? We spent hours with the system and its games to find the answer.

What Is It?

The PlayStation Classic looks like a smaller version of the original PlayStation, which Sony released in North America in 1995. Like the similar throwback consoles from Nintendo, the PlayStation Classic comes preloaded with a selection of titles that helped define the system, and you can't change or add to that library. Each of the 20 games has a dedicated virtual memory card and a single quick-access "resume point." Two controllers (without rumble or analog sticks) are included with the unit, but the package lacks an AC adapter. While that last detail may seem like a serious oversight, the USB ports on some TVs can power the unit. If that's not an option, the USB cord can also be plugged into common smartphone wall chargers, so the omission doesn't detract much from the plug-and-play appeal.

The Games

The early forays into 3D gaming may feel sluggish by modern standards, and compared to 8- and 16-bit titles, we generally don't see the same outpouring of affection for games of this era. However, several titles on the PlayStation Classic help remind us of all the great things this generation had to offer. A few of my favorites include Final Fantasy VII and Wild Arms, hugely influential RPGs that still hold up today. Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee remains a funny and inventive journey, and Intelligent Qube is an underrated gem of a puzzler.

These are the original versions of the games, which can sometimes be charming – like seeing the old pseudonyms for the voice performers in Metal Gear Solid. On the other hand, this localization of Revelations: Persona is infamously bad for various reasons, and no fan of the series would recommend it. I also would have liked to see a little more emphasis on providing good games rather than historically significant ones, especially when it comes to picking a single entry in a series. Why Twisted Metal instead of Twisted Metal 2? Or the original Grand Theft Auto instead of GTA 2?

Lastly, while I'm sure licensing these games is no easy feat, the absence of certain iconic platform-defining titles like Tomb Raider, Tony Hawk's Pro Skater, and Gran Turismo conveys a nagging sense that the collection is incomplete. It's better than nothing, but not nearly as good as it could be.

The Verdict

The PlayStation Classic is a good fit for an extremely specific audience: The intersection of people who have great fondness for important games on PlayStation and who have a gaming setup that constantly keeps the system within an arm's reach. Having to hit buttons on the unit to set resume points or return to the main menu is a pain, and the controller cords (which are about 4.5 feet long) keep you tethered pretty close. The problem of proximity isn't exclusive to the PlayStation Classic; the NES and SNES Classic Editions also have similar limitations. However, one issue that is unique here is the lack of analog sticks on the controller. It isn't a problem for every title, but I found it practically impossible to enjoy revisiting games like Metal Gear Solid and Rainbow Six without them. Combined with an overall hit-and-miss selection of titles and a barebones menu presentation, the PlayStation Classic does just enough to conjure the minimum amount of expected nostalgia, but it doesn't take any extra steps to augment, enhance, or curate the experience.

LIMITED APPEAL ■■■■■■□□□□

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All 20 Games

- Battle Arena Toshinden
- Cool Boarders 2
- Destruction Derby
- Final Fantasy VII
- Grand Theft Auto
- Intelligent Qube
- Jumping Flash
- Metal Gear Solid
- Mr. Driller
- Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee
- Rayman
- Resident Evil Director's Cut
- Revelations: Persona
- Ridge Racer Type 4
- Super Puzzle Fighter II Turbo
- Syphon Filter
- Tekken 3
- Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six
- Twisted Metal
- Wild Arms

Holding Back The Tide

THQ Nordic has a formidable arsenal at its disposal, but when are we going to see it?

by Matthew Kato

Darksiders

In 2018 alone, THQ Nordic acquired several franchises, adding to an already heaping war chest of assets: Metro, Saints Row, Dead Island, Kingdoms of Amalur, Homefront, and Alone in the Dark to name a few. Its small empire spans mobile, niche European PC games, HD remasters of abandoned classics, brand new blockbusters like Darksiders III, and entire companies, such as Deep Silver. As impressive in scope as THQ Nordic's holdings are, it's a goldmine that has been relatively untapped so far. Can the company execute on its formidable promise? With 55 games in development and another 35 not even announced yet, THQ Nordic could become the next major publisher, or it could overextend itself.

THQ Nordic grew out of Swedish publisher Nordic Games, which took its first expansive steps when it acquired European publisher JoWood Entertainment (along with DreamCatcher Interactive) in 2011, and it continued this growth strategy when THQ filed for bankruptcy in 2013. Nordic benefited from the subsequent fire sale, paying $4.9 million for THQ's properties, including 150 games from franchises such as Darksiders and Red Faction. Later in 2014, Nordic acquired the THQ trademark. The transformation was complete in 2016 when it changed its name to THQ Nordic.

Since then, the company has acquired Koch Media (owners of Deep Silver), which includes the big-name franchises Metro, Saints Row, and Homefront. This is supplemented by snapping old Nickelodeon titles, shooter TimeSplitters, and infamous RPG Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning.

This hyper-expansion is just ink on paper for gamers who have yet to see the fruits of this activity beyond remasters, but THQ Nordic studio director Reinhard Pollice says the company is being very careful with the moves it makes, though there's no one route to success. "We don't have a clear roadmap, because this, in the end, is what drives failure – If you are pressured to take decisions at a certain time," he says. "This would be very dangerous soil. So I'm glad we don't have this approach."

Pollice, however, is very aware that fans are waiting expectantly for THQ Nordic to execute on the promise inherent in a series like Red Faction, which petered out almost a decade ago but could benefit from a fresh coat of paint or even a new perspective. "It's not that we haven't had good opportunities," he says. "The shooter market is just very competitive, and we want to have the right opportunity."

Pollice takes care of product development and partnerships with internal and external studios to oversee games' development and help preserve creators' visions. In some cases, this involves working with the original developers, something that can be important in preserving the essence of the property as it goes forward. "For us, it's always interesting to get in touch with the original creators and understand why a certain project ended up the way it ended up," Pollice says. "If you understand the past you can control the future in a better way. But on the other hand, it's not always possible to get the original teams onboard. Sometimes it's only about certain individuals that made up the core of the secret sauce of a certain product."

One such example is Gunfire Games, the studio handling the recent Darksiders III (see our review on page 85), which includes people who worked on the first two Darksiders titles at Vigil Games (previously owned by THQ). While the game and THQ Nordic benefit from such collaborations, Pollice says THQ Nordic does not want to necessarily create an internal studio system of wholly owned subsidiaries.

"I think for us it's important that we're not building a studio system," he says. "We want to have internal development studios that can play to their strengths, and that means they're not in a system where they're not in control of their own destiny." That's not to say THQ Nordic isn't buying studios. At the time of this writing the company just purchased Bugbear Entertainment (FlatOut) and Coffee Stain Studios (Goat Simulator), and it already has internal developers with studios around the world.

However THQ Nordic is structured, so far stockholders of the publicly traded company must be relatively happy with how it is going about its business. An interim report encompassing January 1, 2018 through September showed net sales up 988 percent to $300.8 million when compared to the previous year due to a range of titles from re-releases Red Faction Guerrilla Re-Mars-tered and Titan Quest to games like The Bard's Tale IV: Barrows Deep and Pathfinder: Kingmaker from the newly acquired Deep Silver.

The fact that there are no triple-A game in there that can go toe-to-toe with the likes of Assassin's Creed Odyssey or Red Dead Redemption II – yet THQ Nordic is still in good shape – speaks to the company's approach that relies on serving all platforms but still picking and choosing its battles. The company's releases include system-specific titles like PC's This is the Police 2, distribution deals, and games from both internal and external partners that also include niche offerings for specific markets or interests.

Red Faction Guerrilla Re-Mars-tered

The ball may be in THQ Nordic's court, but Pollice stresses that the company still needs to be smart in how it moves forward with its cache of properties, whether it's adding microtransactions, how it approaches the games-as-service format, and addresses other trends in the industry. "We're trying to not go where the market goes too much," he says. "So you will not see a battle royale game from us anytime soon [unless] there is a spin on that that's so good… But, for example, other big companies in the industry have to chase the battle royale dream because it's such a buzzword and it's making so much money. For us it's rather we don't have to do that because we know it will be hard to compete in that marketspace anyway."

"It's a very hit-driven business," says Joost van Dreunen, CEO of industry researchers SuperData. "Everyone's always either dying or beating the competition. What THQ Nordic is trying to accomplish is mitigate that risk – increase their chances of survival by having a more rational portfolio approach rather than the hit-driven approach." Van Dreunen points out that this is something that helps THQ Nordic in the European market versus here in North America. "They have lots of titles, and they can release three of them this year or 30 of them, it's kind of up to what their strategic approach allows them to," he says.

Van Dreunen is optimistic about THQ Nordic's chances of marshalling its assets into something formidable, believing the ability of Pollice and others at the company to set up an organizational system that fosters creative talent to lead to commercial success. "It's not just, 'Let's buy a few assets, add 'em up, and see if we can squeeze out some efficiency and make more money,'" he says. "It's really about trying to establish different properties that each have their own life, and hoping one of them pops, of course."

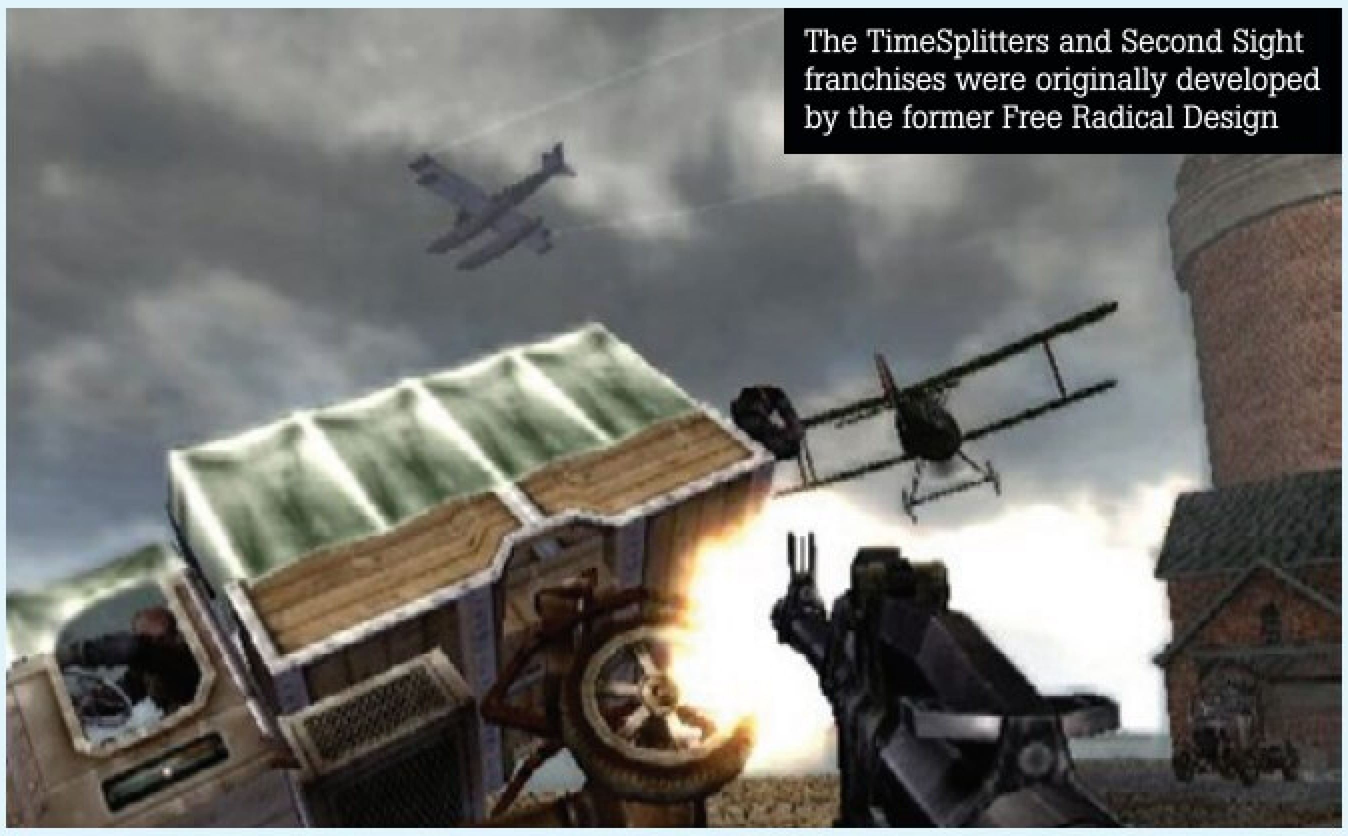
Metro Exodus is a triple-A title in a roster stocked with mainly middle-tier properties

But with an increasing gamut of properties and studios, there is a danger of becoming too big to maintain, especially if you don't have the big hits comparable to those that keep the likes of Electronic Arts and Activision running and which pay for all the non-FIFA and non-Call of Duty games at those companies. In fact, the death of the original THQ was partly due to the phenomenon of a shrinking middle-class third-party publishers – those not small and nimble enough to be a focused, sustainable indie developer, and not successful enough to keep up with the rising cost of development and maintaining a studio system like an EA.

"You got a whole bunch of games that make a little bunch of money," Van Dreunen says, describing this kind of situation, "and each of them have a thousand really excited players but not much else. Does it make sense to have that many titles to maintain? That's a challenge. If you go for long-term gameplay where you go for a lifecycle management of a customer base. Does it make sense to have 20 of them or 50 of them? Or would you just gravitate back toward a hit-driven model? With a portfolio approach, the scale of those things can amount to nothing. They can cancel each other out. And then, of course, the logistics are...It's much easier to do one game, one brand manager, one creative designer. You have 20 of those people, well, good luck. That's a risk, but that's inherent to the portfolio approach."

Van Druenen believes that THQ Nordic's acquisition spree has created a messy situation that requires careful integration – a period it is going through now – and that the company's credibility with investors and shareholders over the next couple of years will increasingly depend on its ability to deliver.

But he also thinks THQ Nordic can carve out a space for itself, not unlike Ubisoft. "Let's have more stories, more opportunities to spend our time on," he says. "And that's what I like about Ubisoft, too. They just bring a different angle. Do people care about them as much as people care about Activision? No, but they still add something unique to the marketplace. THQ can fill a similar role. There has to be some choice in the market, and that's where I think THQ is doing a good job." ◆



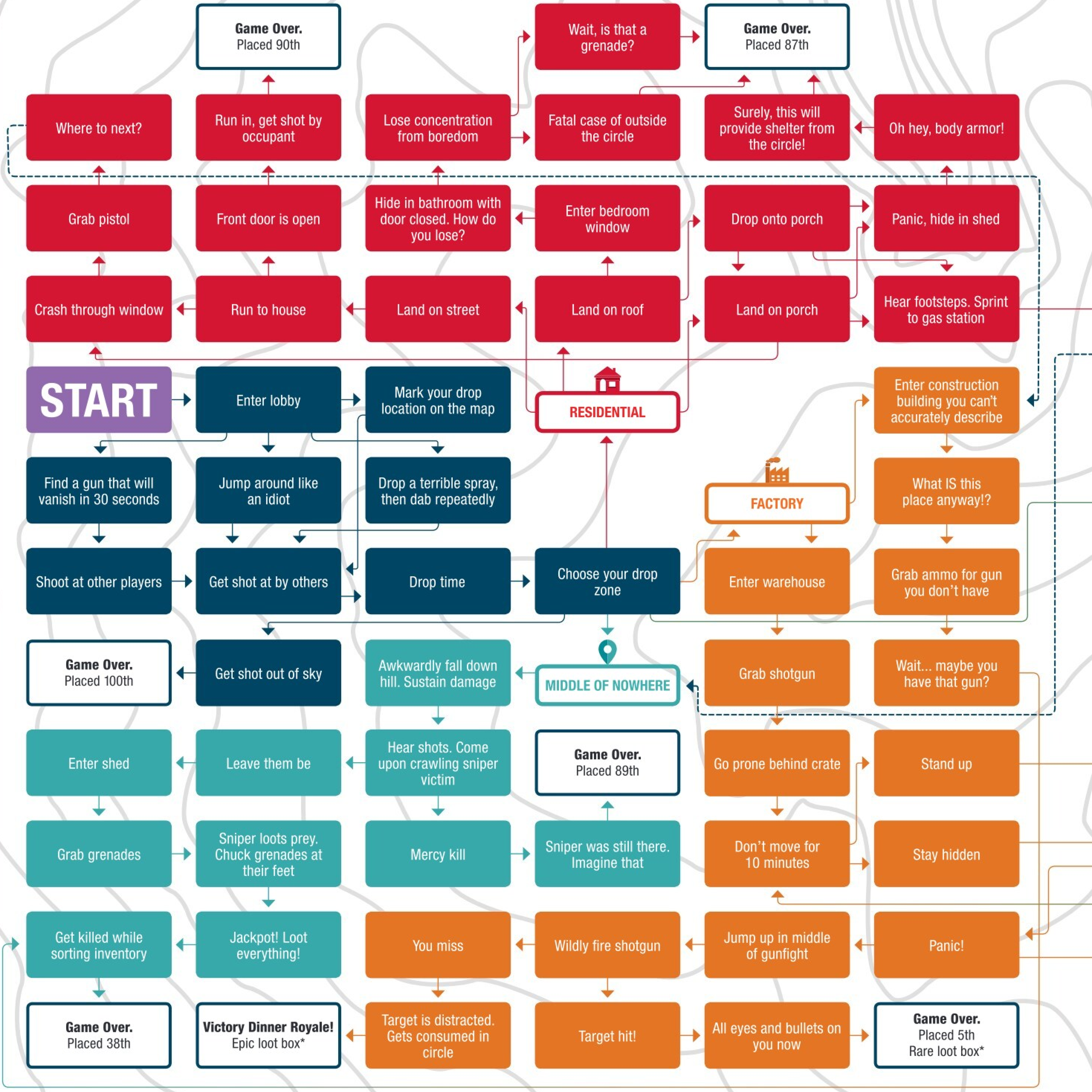
The TimeSplitters and Second Sight franchises were originally developed by the former Free Radical Design

Goat Simulator is the kind of niche PC product that THQ Nordic is relying on as a key part of its backbone

EVERY BATTLE ROYALE GAME EVER

See if you can be the last person standing in this flowchart game.

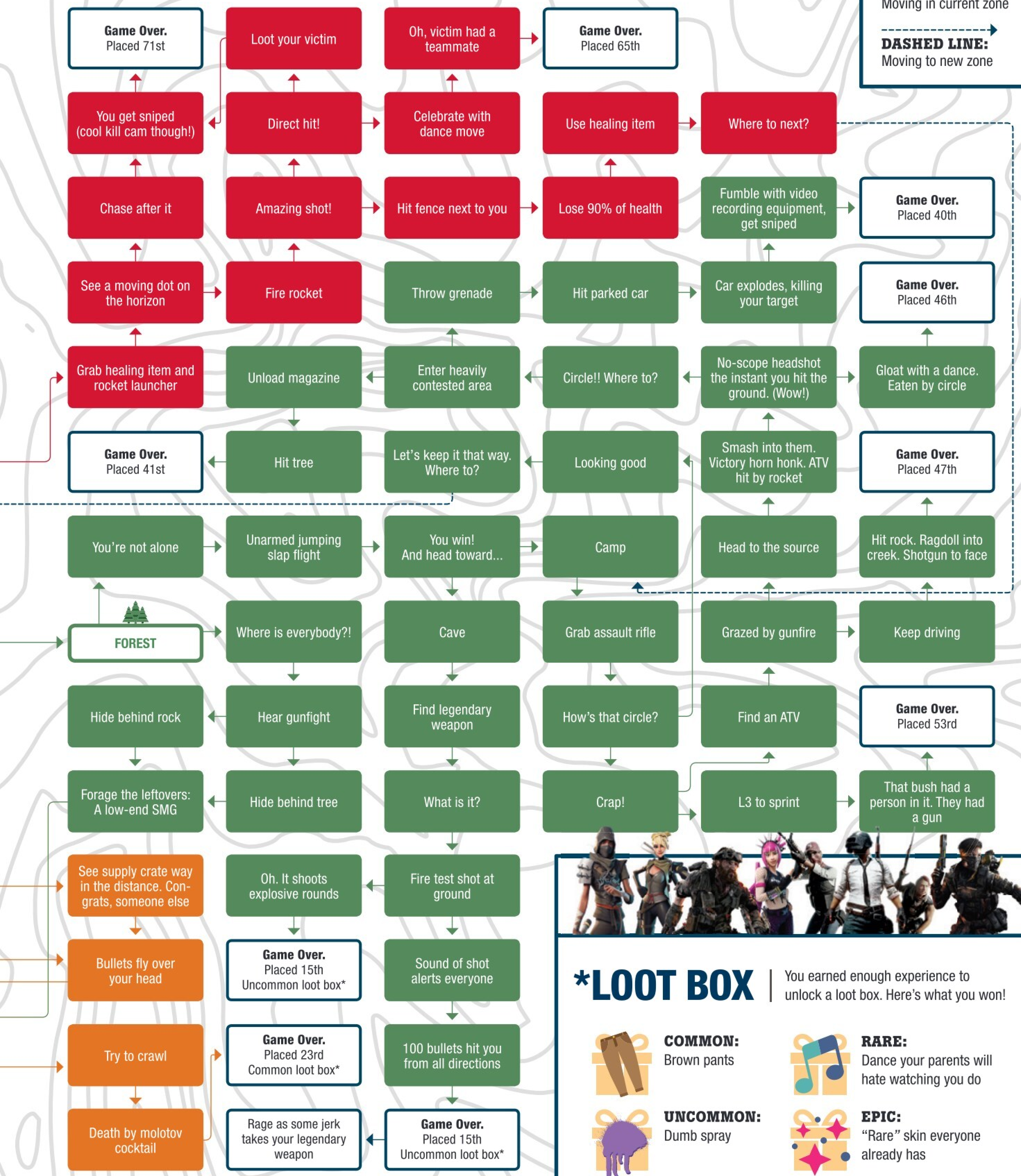
by Andrew Reiner and Jeff Cork


Game Over. Placed 90th
Wait, is that a grenade?
Game Over. Placed 87th
Where to next?
Run in, get shot by occupant
Lose concentration from boredom
Fatal case of outside the circle
Surely, this will provide shelter from the circle!
Oh hey, body armor!
Grab pistol
Front door is open
Hide in bathroom with door closed. How do you lose?
Enter bedroom window
Drop onto porch
Panic, hide in shed
Crash through window
Run to house
Land on street
Land on roof
Land on porch
Hear footsteps. Sprint to gas station
START
Enter lobby
Mark your drop location on the map
RESIDENTIAL
Enter construction building you can't accurately describe
Find a gun that will vanish in 30 seconds
Jump around like an idiot
Drop a terrible spray, then dab repeatedly
FACTORY
What IS this place anyway!?
Shoot at other players
Get shot at by others
Drop time
Choose your drop zone
Enter warehouse
Grab ammo for gun you don't have
Game Over. Placed 100th
Get shot out of sky
Awkwardly fall down hill. Sustain damage
MIDDLE OF NOWHERE
Grab shotgun
Wait... maybe you have that gun?
Enter shed
Leave them be
Hear shots. Come upon crawling sniper victim
Game Over. Placed 89th
Go prone behind crate
Stand up
Grab grenades
Sniper loots prey. Chuck grenades at their feet
Mercy kill
Sniper was still there. Imagine that
Don't move for 10 minutes
Stay hidden
Get killed while sorting inventory
Jackpot! Loot everything!
You miss
Wildly fire shotgun
Jump up in middle of gunfight
Panic!
Game Over. Placed 38th
Victory Dinner Royale! Epic loot box*
Target is distracted. Gets consumed in circle
Target hit!
All eyes and bullets on you now
Game Over. Placed 5th Rare loot box*

LEGEND

SOLID LINE:
Moving in current zone

DASHED LINE:
Moving to new zone


Game Over. Placed 71st
Loot your victim
Oh, victim had a teammate
Game Over. Placed 65th
You get sniped (cool kill cam though!)
Direct hit!
Celebrate with dance move
Use healing item
Where to next?
Chase after it
Amazing shot!
Hit fence next to you
Lose 90% of health
Fumble with video recording equipment, get sniped
Game Over. Placed 40th
See a moving dot on the horizon
Fire rocket
Throw grenade
Hit parked car
Car explodes, killing your target
Game Over. Placed 46th
Grab healing item and rocket launcher
Unload magazine
Enter heavily contested area
Circle!! Where to?
No-scope headshot the instant you hit the ground. (Wow!)
Gloat with a dance. Eaten by circle
Game Over. Placed 41st
Hit tree
Let's keep it that way. Where to?
Looking good
Smash into them. Victory horn honk. ATV hit by rocket
Game Over. Placed 47th
You're not alone
Unarmed jumping slap flight
You win! And head toward...
Camp
Head to the source
Hit rock. Ragdoll into creek. Shotgun to face
FOREST
Where is everybody?!
Cave
Grab assault rifle
Grazed by gunfire
Keep driving
Hide behind rock
Hear gunfight
Find legendary weapon
How's that circle?
Find an ATV
Game Over. Placed 53rd
Forage the leftovers: A low-end SMG
Hide behind tree
What is it?
Crap!
L3 to sprint
That bush had a person in it. They had a gun
See supply crate way in the distance. Congrats, someone else
Oh. It shoots explosive rounds
Fire test shot at ground
Bullets fly over your head
Game Over. Placed 15th Uncommon loot box*
Sound of shot alerts everyone
Try to crawl
Game Over. Placed 23rd Common loot box*
100 bullets hit you from all directions
Death by molotov cocktail
Rage as some jerk takes your legendary weapon
Game Over. Placed 15th Uncommon loot box*

*LOOT BOX

You earned enough experience to unlock a loot box. Here's what you won!

COMMON:
Brown pants

RARE:
Dance your parents will hate watching you do

UNCOMMON:
Dumb spray

EPIC:
"Rare" skin everyone already has

Heir To The Frozen Throne

J. Allen Brack has taken over the presidential reins of Blizzard Entertainment. Preceded by Mike Morhaime, these are some huge shoulderpads to fill. But Brack's long history at Blizzard – beginning with one of World of Warcraft's best expansions, The Burning Crusade – preps him to handle the brand's legendary IPs and fervent fanbase.

interview by Daniel Tack

How did you start at Blizzard?
I was working at another game company, and this was at the end of 2005. I'd been working in online games for a very long time, since 1999. I got into MMOs and I'd been doing that for a while. I was introduced to Rob Pardo and I said I was kind of looking for my next thing. We had a couple of phone chats, I came and met the team, had an all-day interview, and ended up getting a job offer to work as a senior production person on World of Warcraft in charge of content, and the rest is history.

How did the changing of the guard happen?
Mike [Morhaime] has talked to me about his succession plans of who he thought the right person was at certain times over the years. A few months before the announcement he came and said, 'I think my time is coming to an end and we're ready to kind of pick the next person to move forward.' It was a little unclear to me when we started the conversation where we were going, but by the end of the conversation, I was like, 'Well, who's going to take over for you?' And he said: 'You are.' I said… 'Am I ready?' He said, 'You'll be ready.'

Now that you're here, what are your plans in terms of doing things differently?
Mike is a great human. He's very values-led, very value-driven. The culture of Blizzard is very values-driven as a result. A lot of the decisions that we've made are really in line with a lot of the values we've identified. The challenge that we have is that we have more games that we're currently working on right now than we ever have in the history of the company. The entire history of the company. How do we bring those projects to success? Some of those are mobile-first projects. We have new projects that we're working on for all the different platforms. How do we continue to deliver on the games that we have, the products that we're working on, and also the new things that we're working on – that's the biggest challenge.

Is it sustainable to have all these games-as-service titles while making new ones?
It's challenging, for sure. It requires a lot of dedicated people and talent. One of the challenges that I think exists at every company is the things that you want to do are very many, and the things you're able to do are very few, just because of the amount of people you have. Ideas are the easiest part of our business. Thinking about the things we want to do, the things we want to chase, the things we want to pursue, and the things that we say, 'That's awesome, we'll do it later.' [or] 'That's awesome and we're not going to do it.' Being able to make those type of decisions of how you're going to invest your time is the real challenge honestly.

What's your favorite Blizzard game?
I love all my children equally.

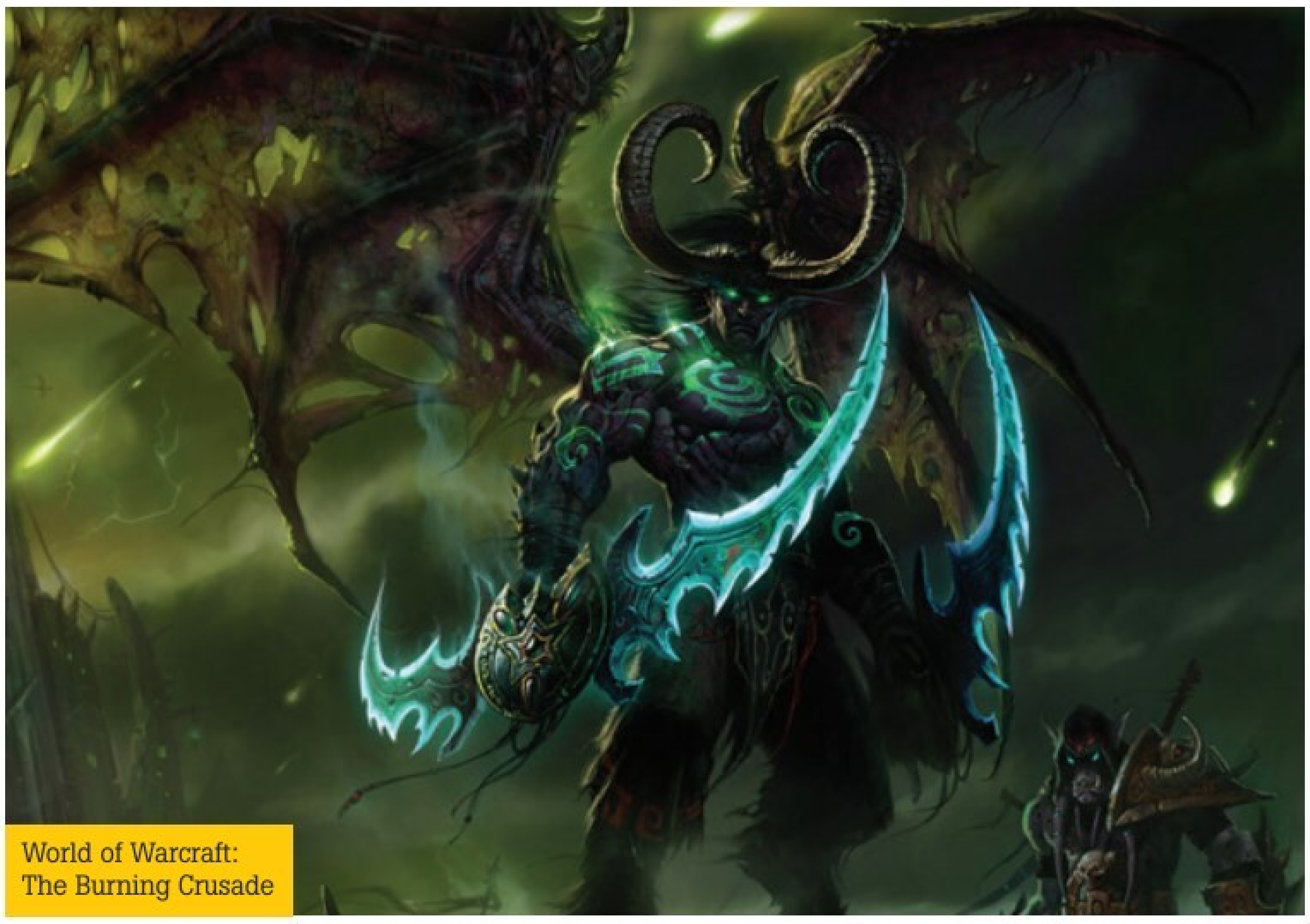
Is there anything you wanted to get into World of Warcraft that didn't make it in?
Oh, zillions of things. No game is ever what a creator really wants. It's really easy to come up with different ideas – it's really hard to execute them at a really high level of quality. You know, we've talked about having another pass at some kind of mounted combat system for a long time. We've talked about having more ownership of the world; we tried to a do a big thing with garrisons, sort of the next level thing of that, shared guild space… There's no shortage of different ideas for what the game could be.

What's a genre that you'd like to see Blizzard tackle that it doesn't have a game in right now?
You know, I would not say that Blizzard would never do this… I play a lot of MMOs, I play a lot of multiplayer games, but I also personally have fun as a player and as a fan of single-player narrative games. I'm not saying that Blizzard would never do a single-player narrative game, but the first multiplayer game we ever made was Warcraft 1, and the number of single player games we've made since that time is zero. Multiplayer is really part of Blizzard and part of Blizzard culture and history. I don't know that we'd ever do sort of a single-player narrative type game, but for those types of games that are done very well I enjoy playing them.

What's your favorite non-Blizzard game?
One of my favorite games of all time, and this is going to date me… One of my favorite games of all-time is Privateer, a Wing Commander game from Origin. Archon, a very old Electronic Arts game. Star Control II, made by some of the same folks who helped make Archon. I loved the spirit of what Ultima Online was. I worked at Origin but I didn't work on Ultima Online at that time, and the humanity of Ultima Online was an amazing experience.

Why Warcraft III: Reforged instead of Warcraft IV?
It's a different set of challenges. I'd love for us to make a Warcraft IV someday, and maybe someday we will. It's not an equal choice. We had a lot of success with StarCraft Remastered and bringing that back on to the modern Battlenet platform. Warcraft III is a hugely popular game around the world still today, the foundation of what World of Warcraft became.

What are your thoughts on the future of games? Consoles? An all-streaming future?
I think I've been hearing we're going to stream everything from the cloud for like 10 years now. It's been a long time. We're getting closer. It's something we pay attention to. For me, I think of it as a way to potentially extend the addressable audience size. Theoretically, assuming high bandwidth, assuming close to a data center… It's nascent technology, and it's a huge part of the future for sure, but we're not quite there yet.


World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1994
Joins Origin Systems as an associate producer

2000
Begins work as a producer on Star Wars Galaxies for Sony Online Entertainment

2006
Joins Blizzard Entertainment

2007
Begins serving as lead producer on World of Warcraft expansions The Burning Crusade and Wrath of the Lich King

2009
Leads the initiative for World of Warcraft charity pet, an annual campaign which has raised more than $15 million for charitable causes

2010
Begins serving as production director on World of Warcraft expansions Cataclysm and Mists of Pandaria

2014
Takes the helm of World of Warcraft as executive producer; oversees launch of Warlords of Draenor

2017
With the memorable opening at BlizzCon, "And I want to talk about ice cream," Brack satisfies everyone's craving for vanilla with World of Warcraft Classic

2018
Named president of Blizzard Entertainment

Turning Up The Heat

Cozy up for winter gaming using this hot gear

by Ben Reeves

1 Unown Artifacts Knit Beanie
Unown is a mysterious and mystical Pokémon, but one thing we know for sure is that he will keep your head warm.

$19.99 | pokemoncenter.com

1

2

2 Nintendo Mario Kart Checkered Mushroom Hoodie
Even if you're stuck in last place, you'll look good thanks to this slick Mario Kart-themed hoodie, complete with a mushroom chest icon and a checkered hood.

$54.90 | boxlunch.com

3 Zelda Relief Mug

Replenish your heart containers by filling this 20-ounce mug with your favorite Lon Lon milk-based beverages. You can also track your progress across Hyrule using the sepia-tone map on the mug's surface.

$17.99 | thinkgeek.com*

4 Destiny Infinity Scarf

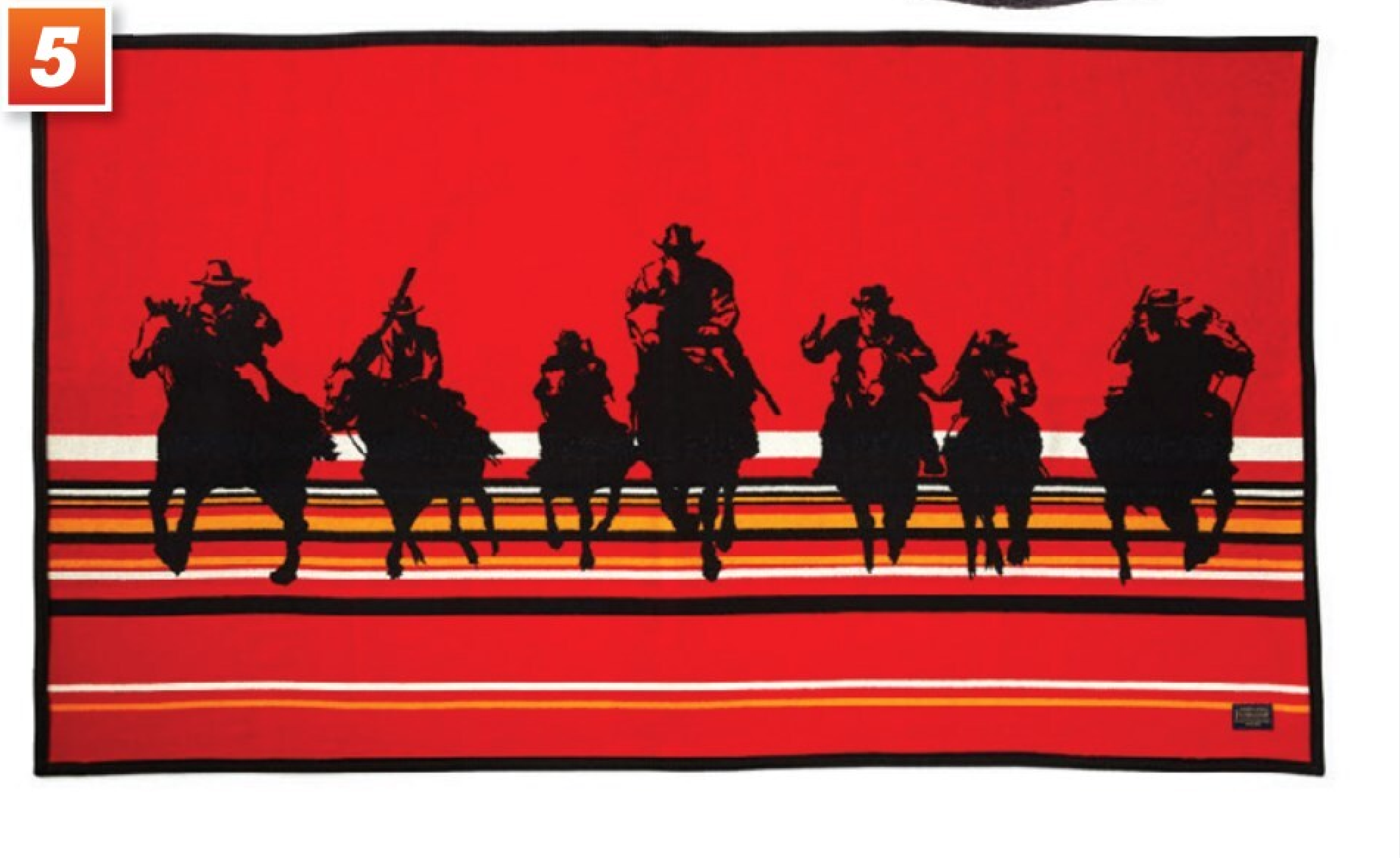
Thanks to the magical force known as Light, Destiny's guardians experience an unending cycle of life and rebirth – much like this Hunter-themed infinity scarf, which has no beginning or end.

$24.99 | bungiestore.com

5 Red Dead Redemption II Pendleton Blanket

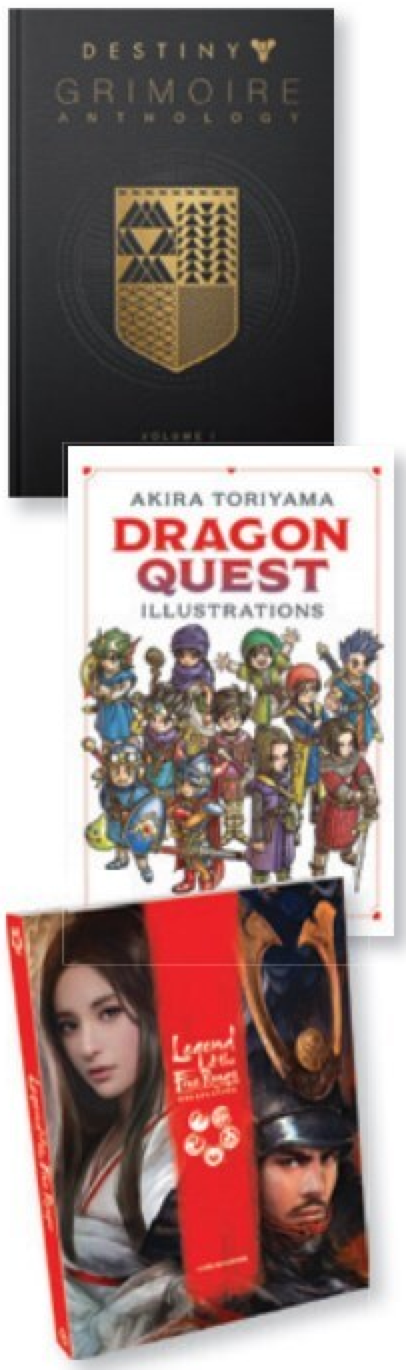
Every wrangler needs to stay warm once the campfire dies down. This felt-bound blanket featuring the Van der Linde gang has been specially designed by Pendleton Woolen Mills, is made from pure virgin wool and cotton, and measures 68 x 39 inches.

$199 | rockstarwarehouse.com ◈



*Full Disclosure: GameStop is the parent company of both Game Informer and ThinkGeek

Media Shelf



DESTINY GRIMOIRE ANTHOLOGY VOLUME I

Even Destiny's hardcore followers are sometimes fuzzy about the world's lore. This illustrated encyclopedia takes many of the myths and mysteries in Bungie's epic shooter and weaves them together to create an illuminating reference book for fans.

$24.99
bungiestore.com

DRAGON QUEST ILLUSTRATIONS: 30TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

Dragon Quest is one of the most beloved Japanese RPG series in history, and this stunning comprehensive hardcover collection includes over 500 illustrations from the renowned Akira Toriyama, as well as a fold-out poster of the Dragon Quest timeline.

$34.99
viz.com

LEGEND OF THE FIVE RINGS ROLEPLAYING RULESET

Inspired by the history of Japan, this stellar RPG lets players control monks, samurai, and courtiers in an age of Bushido. A new custom dice system draws the best elements of old editions and merges it with Fantasy Flight's narrative dice mechanics.

$49.95
fantasyflightgames.com

EA's Astonishing Run Of Brand Blunders Needs To Stop

Continually walking away from its own properties has led Electronic Arts to a series of misses that cost the company millions of dollars

by Matt Bertz, managing editor

Each major publisher has skeletons in its closet that it doesn't like to talk about. Failed projects, studio closures, and once-popular franchises going dormant are frequent occurrences in the volatile video game industry. But one Western publisher in particular has a long track record of giving up on brands and closing studios too quickly, only to have other studios swoop in and capitalize on the vacuum.

Electronic Arts has no shortage of impressive franchises in its catalogue. First-person shooters like Battlefield and Titanfall continue to impress critics. Esteemed subsidiary BioWare has more hits to its name than most other studios focused on role-playing games. The reliable stable of FIFA, NFL, NHL, and NBA sports titles gives the publisher a consistent yearly revenue source. This helps weather the storms of missed sales targets with games like Mirror's Edge or troubled projects like EA's action/adventure Star Wars game, which shifted direction (and studios) in the middle of development. But despite that relative stability, EA has also made a series of poor decisions that keep it from realizing its true potential.

Many of EA's mistakes revolve around its popular brands going dormant too soon or for too long, and these problems aren't exactly new to the publisher. You can go way back to when Ultima was one of the most revered role-playing brands and an early innovator in the open-world space. These games from Origin Systems were ahead of their time, with large worlds to explore, many items to interact with in each dwelling, and non-player characters that followed daily schedules and reacted to your deeds. Diminishing quality led EA to shelve the series, but that didn't mean fans had a diminished appetite for these kinds of games. In its wake, other open-world role-playing games like The Elder Scrolls and The Witcher rose to great prominence, collectively selling billions of dollars' worth of copies to eager players over the last two decades. Talk about a bad call.

These blunders continued through several leadership changes over the last several decades. One of the more egregious recent examples is the sad fate of SimCity. The original city-building simulator created by Will Wright died a slow death with the troubled 2013 release, which inexplicably required an online connection, lost players' saves, and didn't allow players to build large cities. In short, EA blew it. Rather than own up to the bad choices, listen to fan feedback, and begin anew, EA instead chose to walk away from the genre it helped establish. Recognizing the opportunity, Paradox Interactive and developer Colossal Order swooped in with Cities: Skylines, a modern take on SimCity with all the features fans had been clamoring for. The success was immediate and impactful, with the franchise moving upwards of five million copies to date.

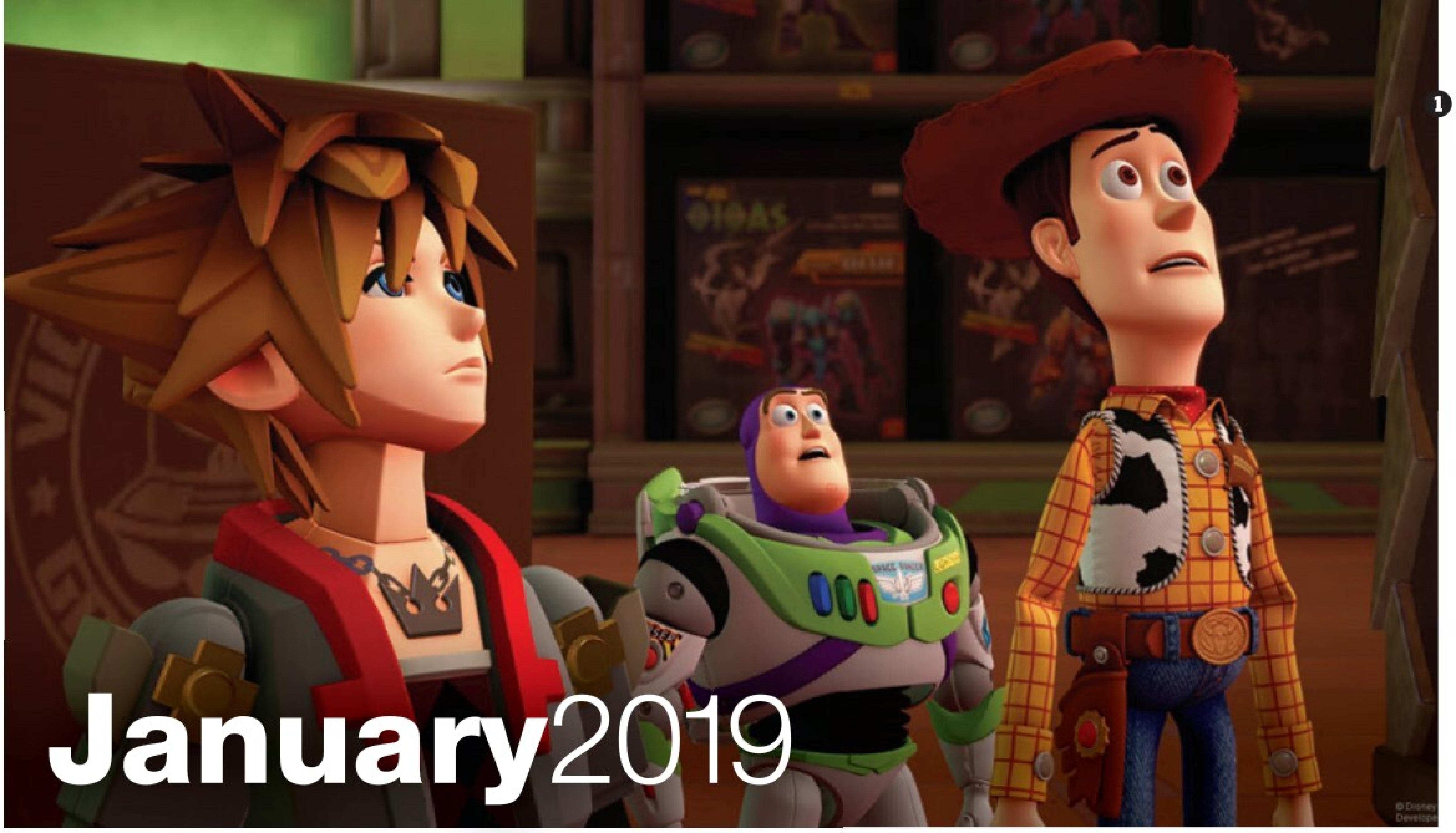
This year's most noticeable act of negligence comes from the sports realm. NBA Jam is one of the most iconic brands in all of video games. EA acquired the rights to the Midway game back in 2010 and released an updated console version that won critical acclaim. After that…nothing. EA turned its back on arcade sports games altogether, neglecting to even celebrate the franchise's 25th anniversary this year. That didn't stop the festivities, however. Creator Mark Turmell hosted a classic game postmortem at the Game Developers Conference. Magazines like *ESPN* and *Game Informer* wrote retrospectives. The Los Angeles Clippers recognized the anniversary with a themed night that included NBA Jam t-shirt giveaways and the game's color commentator, Tim Kitzrow, guest announcing the game at the Staples Center. Arcade sports games may not dominate sales charts, but a market is clearly there for another NBA Jam, as evidenced by Saber Interactive's NBA Playgrounds. The first arcade hoops game did well enough to justify a sequel, with 2K Sports agreeing to publish it.

Why bring up all these missed opportunities? Because if EA doesn't seriously re-evaluate its most recent dormant franchises – notably Dead Space and Mass Effect – it could suffer the same fate as Ultima, SimCity, and NBA Jam, costing EA millions of dollars (and a hell of a lot of mindshare) in the process. Those brands are still sustainable and lucrative if leveraged properly.

Making games isn't easy. Studios sometimes fail, and anticipated titles don't live up to their expectations. But that's not enough cause on its own to justify closing a studio and chucking another brand on the trash heap. Let these studios learn from their mistakes, bring in new faces with fresh ideas, and try again. It's better than simply handing a blueprint to your rivals and letting them flourish in your absence.

The views and opinions expressed in this column are strictly those of the author and not necessarily those of Game Informer

Cities: Skylines



January2019

GAME RELEASES

Friday 11
- › Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story + Bowser Jr.'s Journey (3DS)
- › New Super Mario Bros. U Deluxe (Switch)

Friday 18
- › Ace Combat 7: Skies Unknown (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- › Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes (Switch)

Friday 25
- › Resident Evil 2 Remake (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Tuesday 29
- › Kingdom Hearts III (PS4, Xbox One) ❶

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Thursday 03
- › Gotham (Fox) ❷

Tuesday 08
- › Project Blue Book (A&E)

Sunday 13
- › True Detective (HBO)

Monday 14
- › The Passage (Fox)

Thursday 17
- › Star Trek: Discovery (CBS All Access)

Friday 18
- › Glass (theaters)

Friday 25
- › Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt (Netflix)

GAMER CULTURE

Tuesday 01

Marvel Universe ❸

Some of the biggest names in Marvel's next batch of films are getting new comic book series this month. Captain Marvel, Black Widow, Guardians of the Galaxy, and Spider-Man are just a small number of new books fans can explore. The Defenders and Champions also have jumping-on points for fans.

Wednesday 09

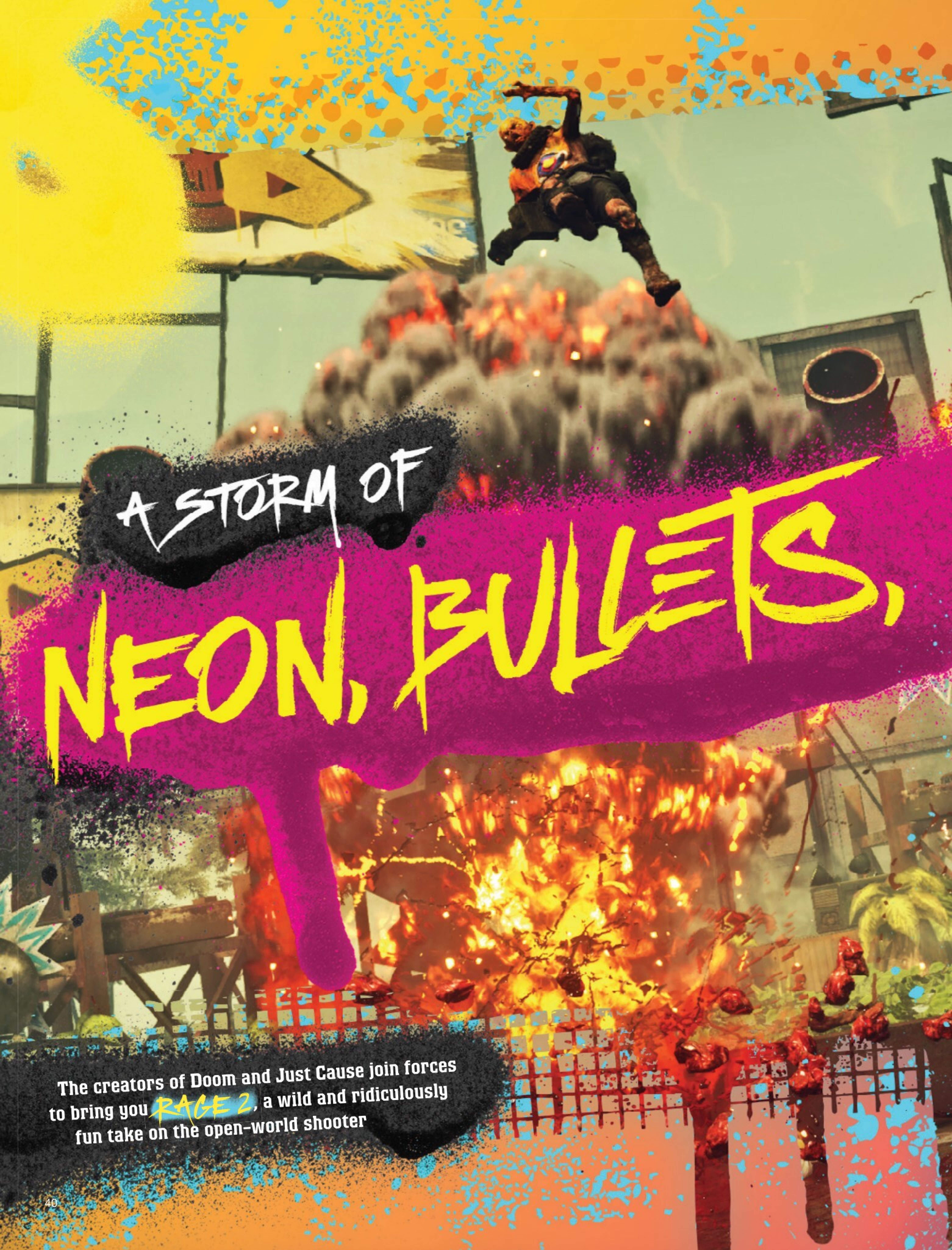
CES 2019

The latest in robotics, automobiles, and televisions are expected to be on display at this year's Consumer Electronics Show. Held in Las Vegas, this four-day show often offers a small glimpse at the future of games, whether it's through graphics cards or new VR headsets. We don't expect much in terms of announcements, but don't be surprised if game streaming is a big talking point at the show.

Wednesday 30

The Other History Of The DC Universe

Oscar-winning screenwriter John Ridley (12 Years a Slave) is revisiting DC Comics' history from the viewpoint of disenfranchised groups and will pinpoint their sociopolitical position in the world. This five-issue series will tell new stories for John Stewart, Vixen, Supergirl, Katana, Rene Montoya, and Extraño. ◈



A STORM OF NEON, BULLETS,

The creators of Doom and Just Cause join forces to bring you *RAGE 2*, a wild and ridiculously fun take on the open-world shooter

» PLATFORM
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Shooter

» PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

» DEVELOPER
Avalanche Studios,
id Software

» RELEASE
2019

AND BLOOD

With Doom, Wolfenstein, and Quake, Texas-based developer id Software played a foundational role in making the first-person shooter one of gaming's genre powerhouses. In 2011, the company released its first new shooter series since 1996 with Rage, which distinguished itself with an art style inspired by *Mad Max* and driving segments. Though reception was positive for id's foray into the post-apocalyptic, especially for the impressive visuals and satisfying combat, it was clear when the radioactive dust settled that the game hadn't made nearly as big of an impact as its forefathers. Rage ultimately languished in the shadows of genre siblings Fallout and Borderlands.

After the sequel was accidentally revealed due to a Walmart leak in the weeks prior to this past E3, reactions to Rage 2 were a mixture of excitement and bafflement. Was there really room for yet another post-apocalyptic shooter? What could this sequel offer to the genre to make it unique? To find out the answer, we traveled to Stockholm, played over two hours of the game, and talked with Avalanche Studios, who's developing the sequel in collaboration with id Software to usher in one of the zaniest, most promising shooters I've seen in a long time.

Here's why playing Rage 2 left us excited and wanting more.

BY JAVY GWALTNEY

KLEGG
AYTON
WELCOME TO
WELLSP

KICK OUT THE JAMS

I start on a dusty road, in the driver seat of a car made from scrap metal, two hood-strapped miniguns, and a missile launcher. A convoy of cars surge ahead to protect our target: an 18-wheeler carrying cargo and decked out with a nasty assortment of weapons. I hit the turbo and blast forward, zooming in between cars belonging to The Immortal Shrouded, one of Rage 2's toughest factions. One of them tries to ram me, narrowly missing. I blast the miniguns and turn it into a smoking heap before swinging to the right and pressing the shoulder button, slamming the chassis of the Phoenix into another car. The vehicle goes lurching over a cliff to its fiery death.

The chase continues. I'm impressed by how well the car handles, with just enough weight behind the physics to make it feel sturdy but more maneuverable than a tank. A minute later, I've gunned or crashed the majority of the guard detail. I'm getting just a bit too cocky when the 18-wheeler reveals its bag of tricks, popping off electric field traps that zap me for a fair bit of health and are difficult to avoid. To make matters worse, the truck starts firing mortar rounds as well.

I dash left and right to avoid the constant bombardment as best as I can and lay down missile fire on the big rig. What follows is a battle of attrition and reflex that I narrowly win, with the truck exploding into pieces. My reward is a big pile of cash that can be used to purchase ammo, health, and other expendables.

These convoy missions, one of the activities found throughout the world, do a great job of showing how satisfying the road warring is, which shouldn't come as too much of a surprise since the same team that developed Mad Max is developing this one. However, it'd be a disservice to say that the two games play the same. Rage 2's vehicular combat is more arcadey, with a focus on quickly whittling down foes with advanced weaponry built into the car instead of harpooning vehicles and shooting them with a sawed-off shotgun. While the on-the-road combat is fun enough, when boots hit the ground Rage 2 shows where its specialties truly lie.

THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE TERRAFORMED

After the road tussle, I load into a section of the campaign shortly after the tutorial, where protagonist Walker (whose gender you determine before the game begins) is on a mission to find allies to bring down the fascist army known as The Authority after the army invaded Walker's home, the community of Vineland. In the nearly three decades that have occurred since the ending of the original Rage, where hero Nick Raine woke up a bunch of the world's inhabitants from cryosleep to fight the Authority, a lot has changed. Avalanche refers to Rage 2 as a post-post-apocalypse. "Trade is growing and a wild west kind of society is emerging," explains narrative director Odd Alhgren. "You have miners, pelt hunters, traders, desperados – all that sort of stuff. People have started rebuilding and sooner or later a real society starts to emerge…but then the Authority returns." Walker's objective is simple: build an alliance, become more powerful, and put down the Authority for good.

I head into Wellspring, a small junktown in the middle of the desert that was also in the first game. Walking around the city, I see citizens fighting with one another, engaging in small talk, and harassing me from afar with insults. The city feels like its own place that exists independent of me instead of being a poorly disguised base for quest givers, though I can engage a large number of people to buy and sell goods or receive intel about special places on the world map to visit. It's not long before I run into another callback to the original Rage: Loosum Hagar, who taught Raine how to use the deadly Wingstick (think of it as a bladed boomerang). Hagar's grown up to become the mayor of Wellspring and a gunslinger. I haven't uttered a word to Hagar before her office is invaded by a bunch of bandits known as the Goon Squad, adrenaline junkies who love pain and violence.

I get to work, blowing foes away with an assault rifle and shotgun. On a base level, the weapons of Rage 2 are very satisfying. The kick of the shotgun followed by an enemy being blown apart or their head flying back after they get slapped with an AR round makes the combat weighty. "The great thing about Rage 2, is it has that true and intense id Software brand of action in an open-world environment," says id Software studio director Tim Willits. "For us it's about the action, the combat, the weapons, the fun things you can do, but we can do it in a much more reactive world, in a setting where you can go around and play at your pace and explore." Indeed, the moment-by-moment gunplay of Rage 2 is as satisfying as anything in the modern iterations of Doom and Wolfenstein. Reloading is quick, the music thumps, and there's a focus on creating an

Jungles, salt flats, marshlands, sand dunes, and more encompass the areas you'll visit during your travels

FIRING ON ALL CYLINDERS

Part of what makes Rage 2's combat so satisfying are the nanotrite powers that Walker can use to stun, bamboozle, and otherwise decimate foes. Alongside movement-based upgrades (like double-jump and dashing) these are some of the powers you acquire during Rage 2 and use in combination with one another to wreak havoc on any group of bandits foolish enough to pick a fight with you. Avalanche says numerous upgrades make these powers even stronger and grant them secondary abilities.

Note: All the powers have in-development names and will possibly change in the final product.

GROUND SLAM

As powerful as its name is self-explanatory, Walker leaps into the air and plummets to the earth, smashing whatever is directly below. A direct attack on an unarmored bandit turns them into a fine paste, while others in the area are briefly stunned, allowing you to zip to them and use another power or shoot them.

BARRIER

As the name implies, Barrier throws up a shield that absorbs bullets. Pretty tame, right? Don't turn that dial just yet. An upgrade allows this defensive power to become much more aggressive, making its touch deadly enough to turn any unlucky enemy into what game director Magnus Nedfors vividly describes as "meat cubes." During our demo, we saw what happens when you throw a vortex grenade into the middle of a barrier near some enemies. Let's just say it was a very *squishy* spectacle.

SHATTER

Shatter is the power that grabbed our attention the most during the demo due to its dual usefulness. Shatter's blast (similar to Star Wars' Force Push) not only blows foes back into walls but it also rips armor off stronger foes, allowing you to target their exposed fleshy parts. Weakened enemies have a habit of being literally torn apart when thrown into a wall.

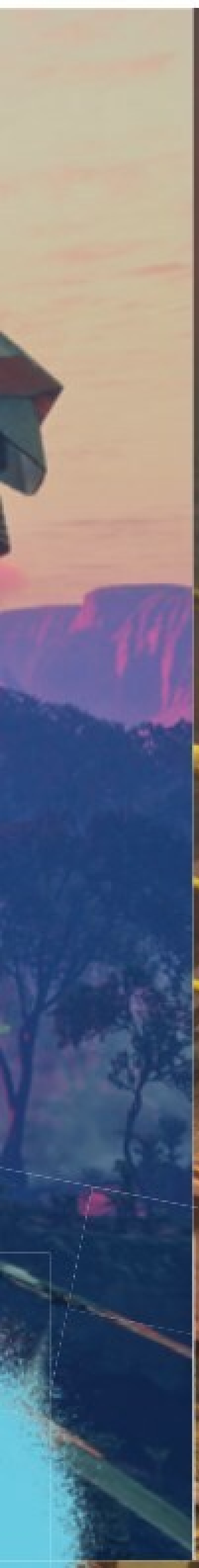
VORTEX GRENADE

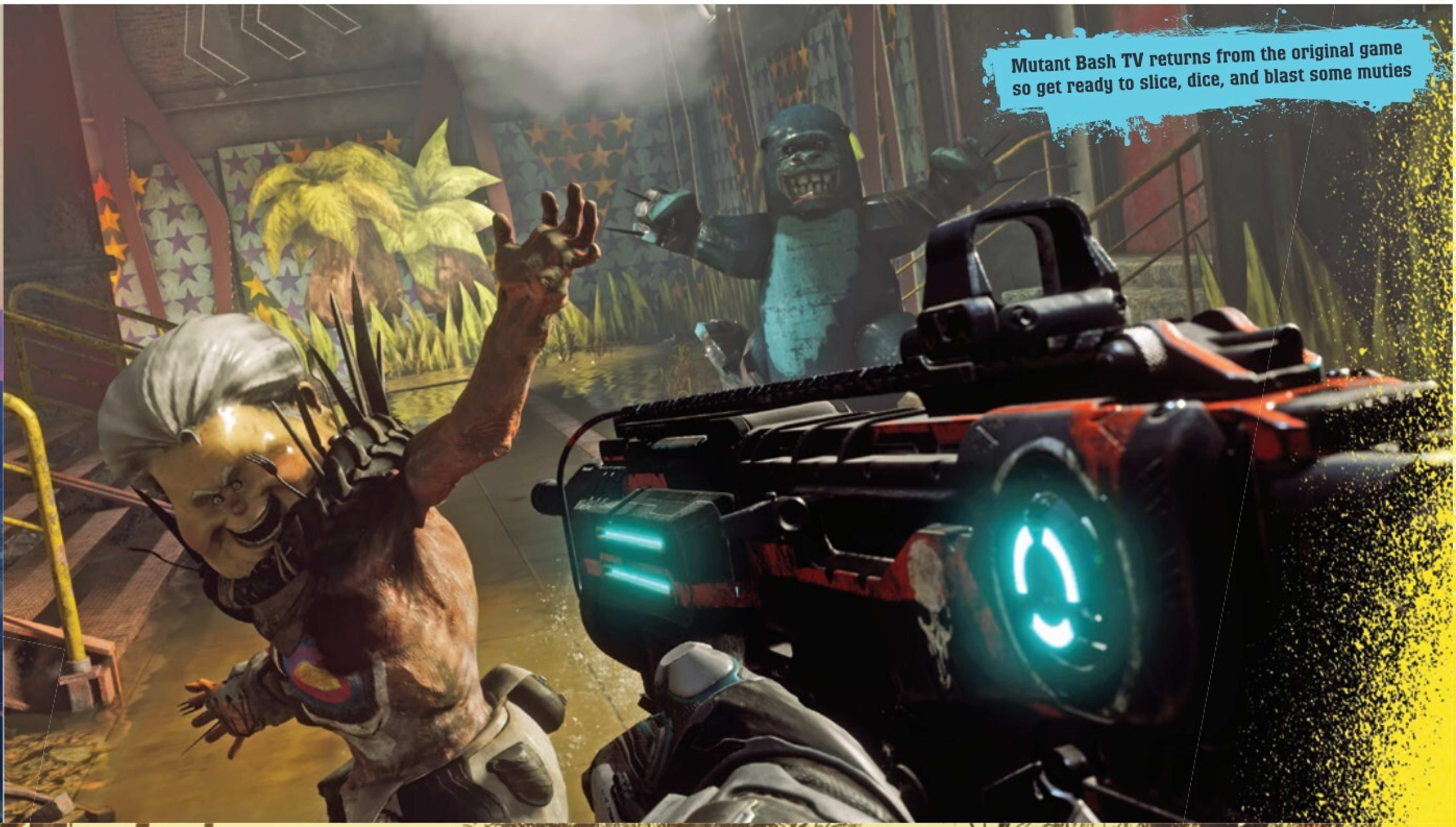
Think of the Vortex Grenade as the combo glue of your power arsenal. Throwing this ethereal grenade creates a black hole that sucks anything – foes or objects – nearby into wherever you threw it for a brief time. When the black hole collapses, it shoots anything caught in its field upward and leaves them suspended and helpless, allowing you to do some quick skeet shooting or use Shatter to send them flying off into the distance.

action rhythm (if you try to stick to cover, you will die). Melee attacks stun enemies to buy you time while dead foes drop health power-ups, and everything is keenly focused on making you feel like a whirlwind of death that dissipates the moment you try to play it safe. That's just on a mechanical level; we haven't even gotten to the powers yet.

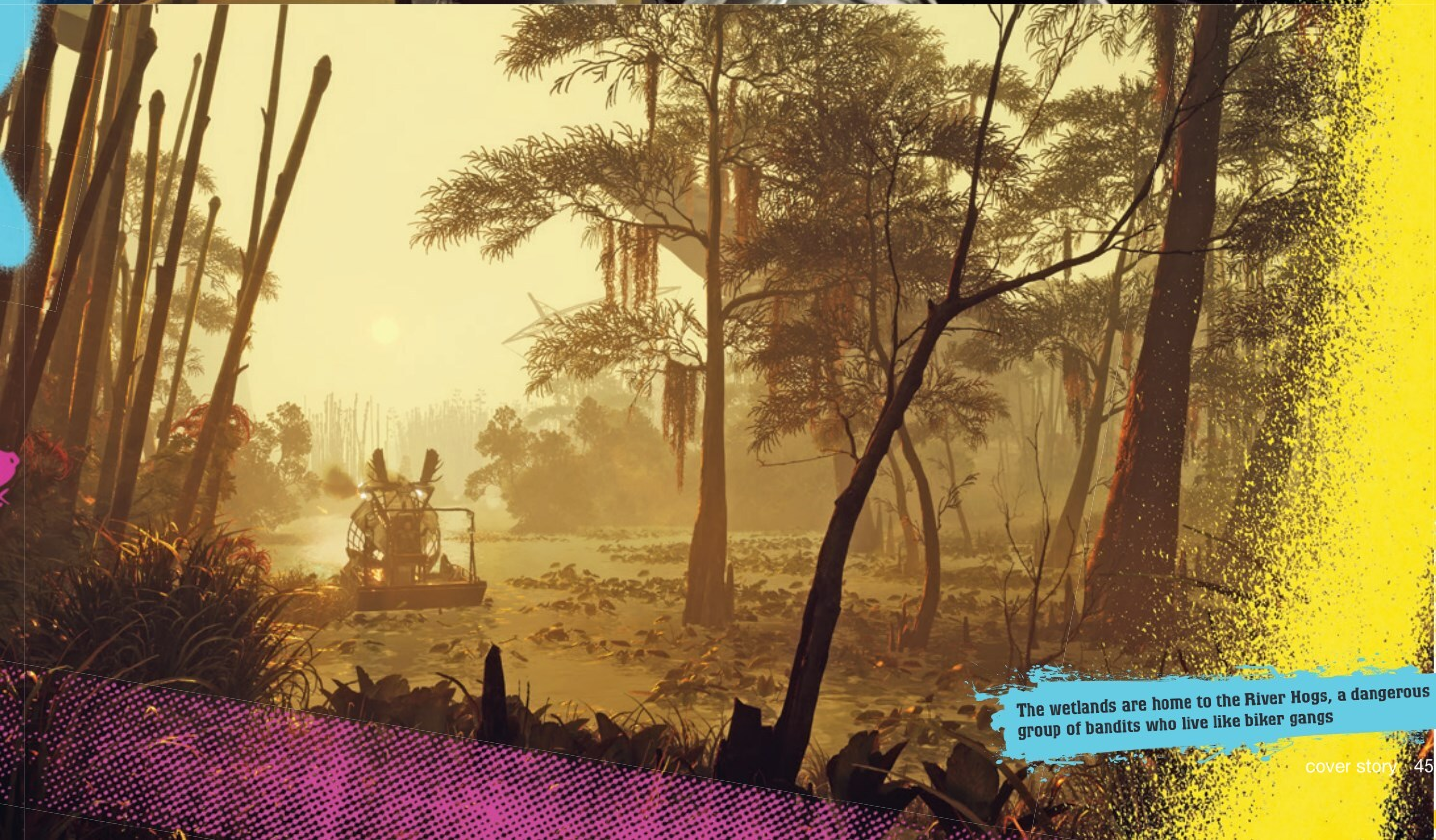
After Hagar and I tidy up her office of hooligans, she agrees to help us out with the Authority if I can assist her in taking down some local billionaire kingpin named Klegg Clayton, who looks like Guy Fieri trying to cosplay Louis XV. I can't storm his club because he'll slip out the back door. Instead, I have to act more covertly and earn his trust by becoming champion in the two television programs he owns: Mutant Bash TV and Chaz's Car Derby. "Piece of cake," says cocky Walker.

I tear out of Wellspring in the Phoenix and make my way over to Mutant Bash. Along the way, I find my attention arrested by events that happen on the road dynamically. Different factions are often on the side of the road fighting one another or ramming each other in car battles, and a trader roams the world in an ice cream truck that you can honk at to get him to stop so you can buy ammo. Avalanche says that you can race random NPCs and the game dynamically creates a track for you wherever you're at. However, I'm pressed for time, so I speed ahead to make sure Walker gets to shine on Mutant Bash TV.





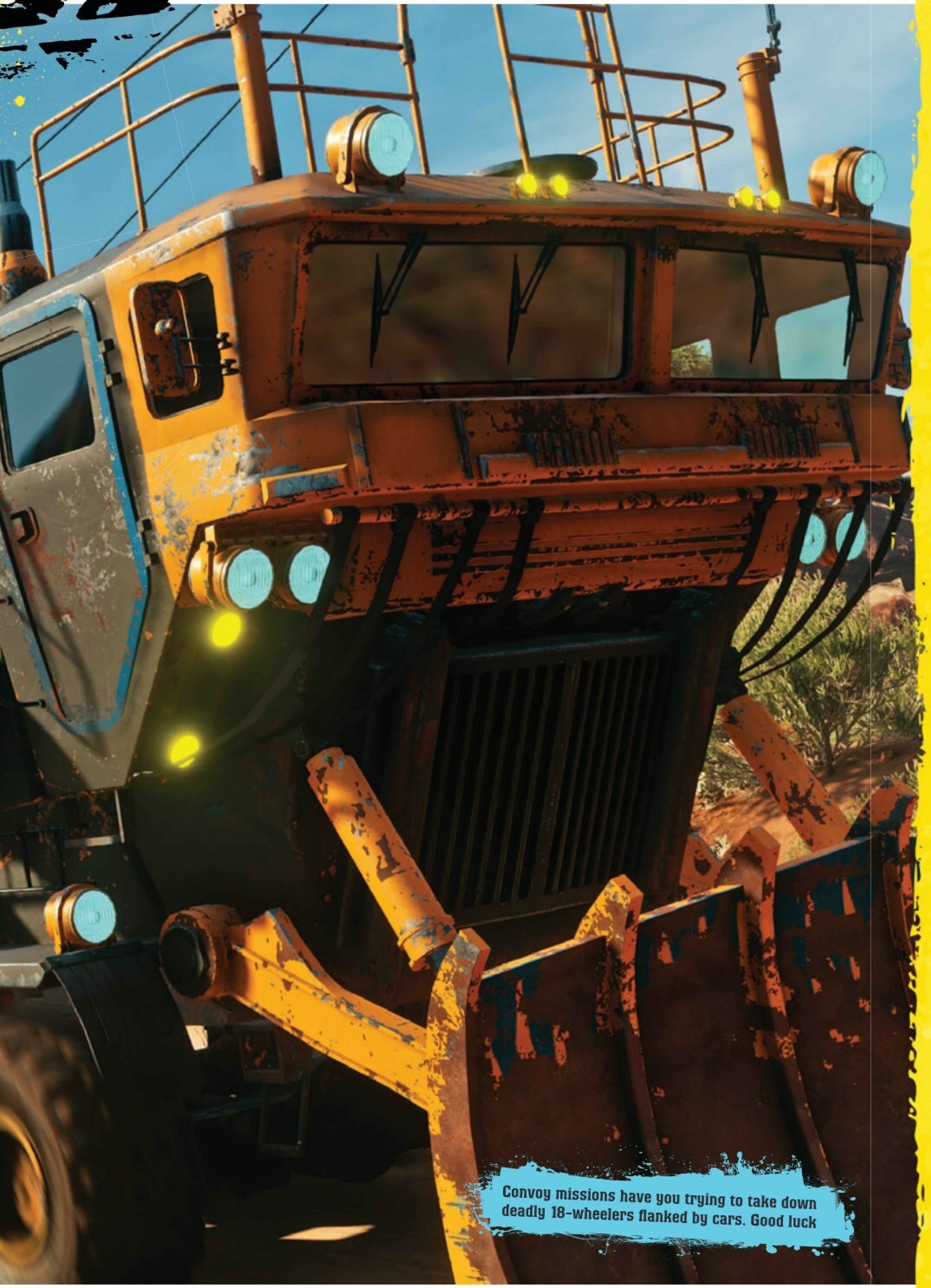
Mutant Bash TV returns from the original game so get ready to slice, dice, and blast some muties



The wetlands are home to the River Hogs, a dangerous group of bandits who live like biker gangs

After meeting the creepy female host of the show, Desdemonya Cold (who equates sex and violence maybe a tad too much), I sign a contract and pop into the first of four arenas. The small, non-descript room spews out mutants that rush me with clubs and knives. Here I start to test the game's nanotrite powers. In the original Rage, nanotrites were small robots in Raine's body that gave him the ability to kickstart his heart and revive himself when he was mortally injured. In Rage 2, the cooldown-operated abilities have more offensive applications. When one of the mutants get too close, I quickly press the shoulder button and right on the d-pad to send him flying into a wall with a powerful blast of force called Shatter. He crumples to the ground and goes still. I turn to see three mutants rushing me and activate another power called Ground Slam, which propels Walker high in the air and then plummeting with a fist aimed at the ground. The impact sends the mutants flying in every direction, stunning them as they hit the ground and giving me ample time to finish all three off with a volley of shotgun blasts. These powers are useful on their own, especially to get you out of dangerous situations. However, when you start to use them in combination with one another, Rage 2 reveals just how deep and enjoyable its combat can be.

In a demonstration that took place after our demo, Avalanche showcased some powers we weren't able to play with and explained how they worked with one another. "We wanted some complementary thing to the weapons," says game director Magnus Nedfors. "Weapons are obviously a component of all id-style shooters, but at Avalanche we like to give the players toys of some kind." And what rad toys they are. Shatter isn't just a neat power you can use to blast into foes into walls or off ledges. You can also spawn a barrier that is deadly to any foe that touches it and Shatter a foe into it.



Convoy missions have you trying to take down deadly 18-wheelers flanked by cars. Good luck

Likewise, you can use Shatter as a catapult too, flinging explosive barrels at enemies.

Besides the four standard nanotrite powers (see "Firing All Cylinders" sidebar on page 44), you also have a deadly overdrive meter that builds up as you kill enemies in rapid succession. When you activate your overdrive, you become faster and stronger. Your weapons also receive a temporary damage boost, as well as notable visual effects. For example, the shotgun fires much faster, with its barrel heating up with each blast as you tear through foes. Using your abilities to build up your overdrive meter means you can clear entire areas of foes quickly and with flourish, flinging enemies into the air to blast them apart skeet-shooting style. Such scenarios are not only a grizzly, fun ballet of death to construct, they also happen to be highly efficient.

Using my handy shotgun, powers, and wingstick, which homes in on and slaps foes in the face with its blades until they're dead, I survive all four rooms of Mutant Bash TV. What follows is a brief, goofy sequence where Walker accepts a trophy that is then briskly taken away from him. "Well, uh, that's that, I guess," he says before venturing back out to the Wasteland for the next leg of this bloody adventure.

IT TAKES TWO, BABY

Though id Software has licensed its technology to and even worked with developers on projects before (Quake IV, Wolfenstein: The New Order), the company considers its collaboration with Avalanche a special occasion. While Rage 2 certainly looks like a modern id Software title, you might be surprised to learn it doesn't use the company's id Tech 6 engine, which powers the 2016 Doom and Wolfenstein II. Instead, it runs on the Apex engine used to make the Just Cause series. "We've worked with teams before, but this is really the first time it's a true separation with the engine we did not write or actually help build, that's new for us," Willits says. "We've always wanted to come back to the Rage world but our technology, though it's great, is made for one type of game. We've always admired the folks at Avalanche Studios with their open-world games and emergent gameplay so when the opportunity came up where the studio was free, it was a great chance to work with them."

Though the company is doing more than just advising, explicitly helping design the game, Willits stresses that Avalanche is the developer of Rage 2, full-stop. "Avalanche is the developer," he says. "It's their engine we're using, but we have key people not only at id, but at Bethesda that work with the team here at Avalanche all the time. I talk to guys every day. I try to get over to Stockholm as much as I can."

Willits says in spite of the excitement, the early days of collaboration were filled with some trepidation given the necessary resource commitment to the project as well as the literal geographic gulf between the two studios, with id in Dallas and Avalanche in Stockholm. However, video conferencing technology and cloud sharing have made development of Rage 2 easier. "Technology has helped us work together," Willits says. "Both Avalanche and id Software share the same kind of game design philosophies. We trust the team to make a great game and so far they have."

TURF WARS

Nearly three decades have passed in the Rage world since the ending of the original game. During that time, the various groups Nicholas Raine squared off against have shifted radically with the landscape and times, with their philosophies and the roles they play becoming more developed. Here are the five key factions you can expect to fight during your furious travels and explanations of what drives them.

IMMORTAL SHROUDED

During the war that raged between Rage 1 and 2, the hyper militaristic group known as The Shrouded sided with the villainous Authority. The alliance was short-lived. "They realized that the Authority was taking advantage of them, but because they had a warrior's Bushido type code they couldn't back down," says narrative director Odd Alhgren. "They decided to symbolically kill themselves by decimating a tenth of their own people." Since the culling, the soldiers have started wearing masks, vowing to never let anyone take advantage of them again. The Immortal Shrouded have advanced technology to go along with their military training, making them one of the deadlist factions in the land. We often saw them using electric swords and cloaking technology in battles.

GOON SQUAD

Originally the group of cockney-speaking punk bandits known as Wasteland, the Goon Squad has become even more nihilistic and depraved since the conclusion of the first game. "Their aesthetic has evolved from that British punk look to something rooted in any wild junk culture you might find," says Alhgren. "They're all about completely unfiltered violence." The Goon Squad is one of the few agenda-free factions in the Wasteland, causing havoc for the sake of it, and even cheering when their allies are killed in battle. "For them, death is probably the ultimate sensation," says narrative gameplay director Loke Wallmo. Until recently they haven't been too troublesome, sticking to harassing passersby. However, someone is giving them the destructive weapons they're willing to unleash on anyone in sight. "Who is giving them these weapons and why is a mystery that will unravel throughout the game," Alhgren teases.

RIVER HOGS

This faction sticks to the swampy wetlands of Rage 2, which is fitting because these folks are nasty. Essentially a "very trashy" biker gang, the River Hogs enjoy all sorts of excess: drugs, drinking, sex, and being obscene. Don't let their indulgences fool you though: The River Hogs are very competent mechanics (building and maintaining all their vehicles and equipment) and quite dangerous. We watched Walker square off against a giant mech in one of the swamp's trashyards and come away with more than a few scrapes.

THE AUTHORITY

The foes of the first game return, as does their leader Martin Cross. A vicious, fascist regime that seeks to impose Cross' vision on the world, they will stop at nothing to squash the bandits and force the inhabitants of the world to get in line. As the times have changed, so has the tech and soldiers the Authority uses. "The Authority has replaced the free-thinking mutants with more cybernetic implants to have more control over them," Alhgren says, with much of the Authority's troops being pathetic fodder soldiers that look pitiful and grotesque. Even Cross, who's been using a faulty method of cloning to keep himself alive throughout the years, is little more than a torso and head screwed into a giant exosuit, but that doesn't stop this faction from being incredibly deadly thanks to their numbers and advanced tech.

THE ABADON

One of the big twists of the last game was that the dangerous mutants roaming the Wasteland were in fact the result of horrific experiments put on by the Authority. When the Authority withdrew from battle, they left their mutant military leaders (called Warheads) behind like discarded munitions. The Warheads gathered the other less intelligent mutants and formed a new society called The Abadon. We won't spoil the reason behind the name because it's something you should find out for yourself, but rest assured, it's amusing. The Abadon form one of the most interesting groups in Rage 2, with a simplistic religion that mandates sacrificing humans to a god to keep death at bay, thanks to their sympathetic plight to find salvation in a dangerous world.

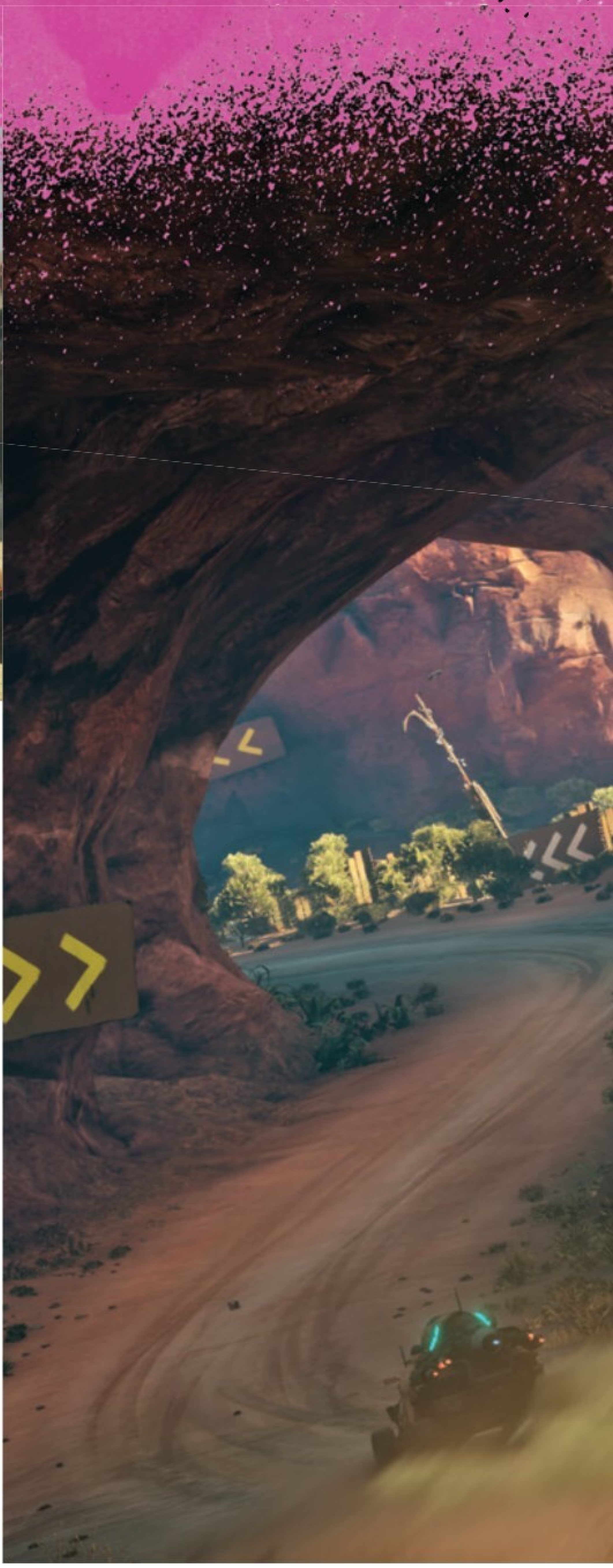
Why settle for shooting foes when you can break their bodies with crushing blows of force?

THE FAST AND THE CURIOUS

I speed to Chaz's derby, where a food-obsessed fellow wearing a pith helmet, the infamous Chaz, enters me in the race. I don't get to drive The Phoenix but instead have to start with a small junker car. The race takes me through a valley with a bunch of rock formations. It's a quick but frustrating affair. Some physics glitches inexplicably force my car on its belly and I have to restart the race twice because of things beyond my control. Eventually I cross the finish line, with both id Software and Avalanche assuring me that they're still working on tooling the physics and design of that race to make it more enjoyable. Regardless, the sequence serves as an indication that thus far Rage 2 is best when you're on foot and taking the fight to foes in contained environments. However, that doesn't mean the world isn't worth exploring in your trusty vehicle.

Klegg Clayton awaits me in Wellspring but hey, this is an open-world game that doesn't take itself too seriously, so why should I? I spend some time getting off the beaten path. After a few minutes, I come across a place that used to be a town but is now a camp for some of The Goon Squad. I turbo into the camp, splattering two of the bandits all over my car before getting out to finish off the stragglers with my assault rifle. The fight is easy and smooth (as it was foretold to be by the helpful difficulty indicator that popped up on the screen as I approached the place). I spend some time cleaning out chests for cash and gathering intel that points to other areas of interest on the map where a fancy weapon or power upgrade may be. However, you can just as easily find these places on your own, without help. "This is an open-world game and you're free to go wherever you want, so without being told to go here and find something special, you can just stumble upon it and engage the content," Nedfors says. "It's you creating the mission for yourself. When you're engaging with it, we let you know you're doing an activity and will be rewarded for it." While we didn't get a comprehensive overview of every activity in the game, Avalanche says there are a lot, and you can bet most of them center around shooting, embracing road rage, and blowing things to pieces.

The foes you fight will sometimes be massive, like this crusher



Much of the criticism directed toward the original game was that it had the appearance of being an open-world game without actually being one, something that both Avalanche and id have taken to heart. "There were a lot of great things in the original Rage but they were all kind of separate," Willits says. "You had level loads, driving areas, and combat areas. Whereas in Rage 2, it all takes place in one open world." Rage 2's open world definitely feels more natural than its predecessor, with seamless transitions between areas, and no divide between driving and gunning. I also appreciate how all the activities feel clustered together so a new thing to do or area worth checking out is almost always literally around the corner.

After clearing out the bandit camp, I take a left and journey down a dirt road, passing a civilian in a car being chased by some of the Goon Squad. He cries for help. Sorry buddy, not my problem. Soon I come across a series of ruins with a giant metallic tower sitting in the middle. I get out to investigate and the first thing it does is zap my car with a laser blast, sending the Phoenix spinning in the air to land upside down. I duck inside what's left of a store, peeking out to fire at the tower's conveniently placed batteries and watch its health bar dwindle. As the fight progresses, the tower breaks out more deadly weapons, including mortars and lasers that rip through walls. Eventually I destroy the battery for the tower and it shuts off. I'm rewarded with cash and Project points. I can use cash to buy expendables like health and ammo but Project points are more desirable since they're the key currency in Rage 2's upgrade system.

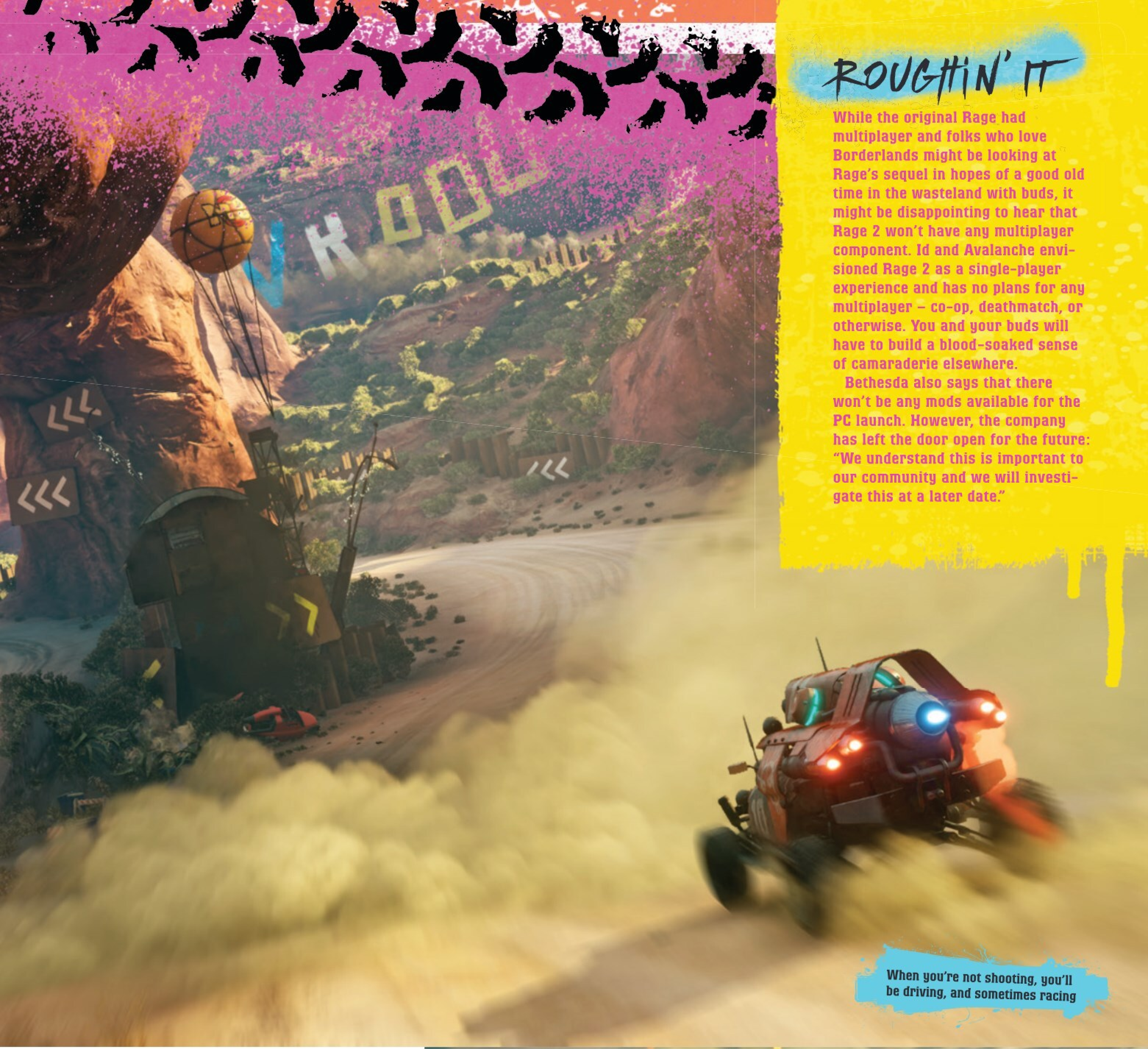
"Projects are your perk tree and those are divided into different categories," Nedfors explains. "You'll meet important people who'll each have a set of projects and tasks for you out in the open world. Smaller activities net small points and vice versa." The trees are divided into several categories that affect various facets of gameplay. Doing tasks for John Marshall, another returning character from Rage, allows you to spend Project points on improving your weapon skills or character stats. Hagar's tree might give you some vehicle upgrades, such as more space in your garage to house various vehicles. "It's wider than skills," Nedfors says. "It's services as well – a mix of everything. It's why we don't call it a skill tree."

I spend some Project points on a 10-percent health boost and longer stun duration for foes before making my way back to the thoroughly toasted Phoenix. Luckily, I can get another one simply by pausing the game, tabbing over to the garage menu, and selecting it. During your travels, you can drive any vehicle you come across – including monster trucks – and store them in your garage after a few Project upgrades. The car spawns in the world without narrative explanation. When I ask Willits and Nedfors about that, they shrug and smile. "It was simply easier to do it that way," Willits says, explaining that trying to come up with a narrative reason for it would create more inconsistencies and questions. While this instance of playing it fast and loose might paint a picture for how Avalanche and id are approaching the story, don't be fooled – there's a surprising amount of narrative consistency and respect for the universe given that Rage 2 is largely a wacky shoot-a-thon.

Besides key characters returning, the factions from the previous game have mutated and their backstories have deepened. The Abadon, mutants who have banded together after being discarded by the Authority between the two games, are a sympathetic lot as they try to build a civilization for their people in the Wasteland – even when they're shooting at you. Nedfors also promises a much better conclusion for Rage 2 than the often-criticized and abrupt one in the first game. "The main story of the game has a good ending with closure," he says. "Once you finish the main story [Avalanche predicts critical path playthrough is around 12 to 15 hours but says there's much more content beyond that], you're allowed to continue on and explore the open world. It will continue to exist as a state and you can gather money and become more powerful during the post-game."

With time in our demo running short, I turn my sights back on Wellspring and Clayton, curious to see where the story leads. Once back in town, I'm welcomed into Clayton's club where he greets me with open, sweaty arms. He leads me up to his office and talks a bit about the importance of respect, how he yearns for Hagar's mayoral office, and how I'll be a great asset in securing his ambitions. A few seconds of monologuing pass and an aide comes to grab him, leaving me alone in his office. I plant the bug Hagar gave me on Clayton's computer and make my way back to the elevator for a quick escape from the club.

After a few seconds of descent, the elevator shuts down and Clayton's voice booms over the PA speaker, bragging about how he knew I was a rat all along and how he's teaming



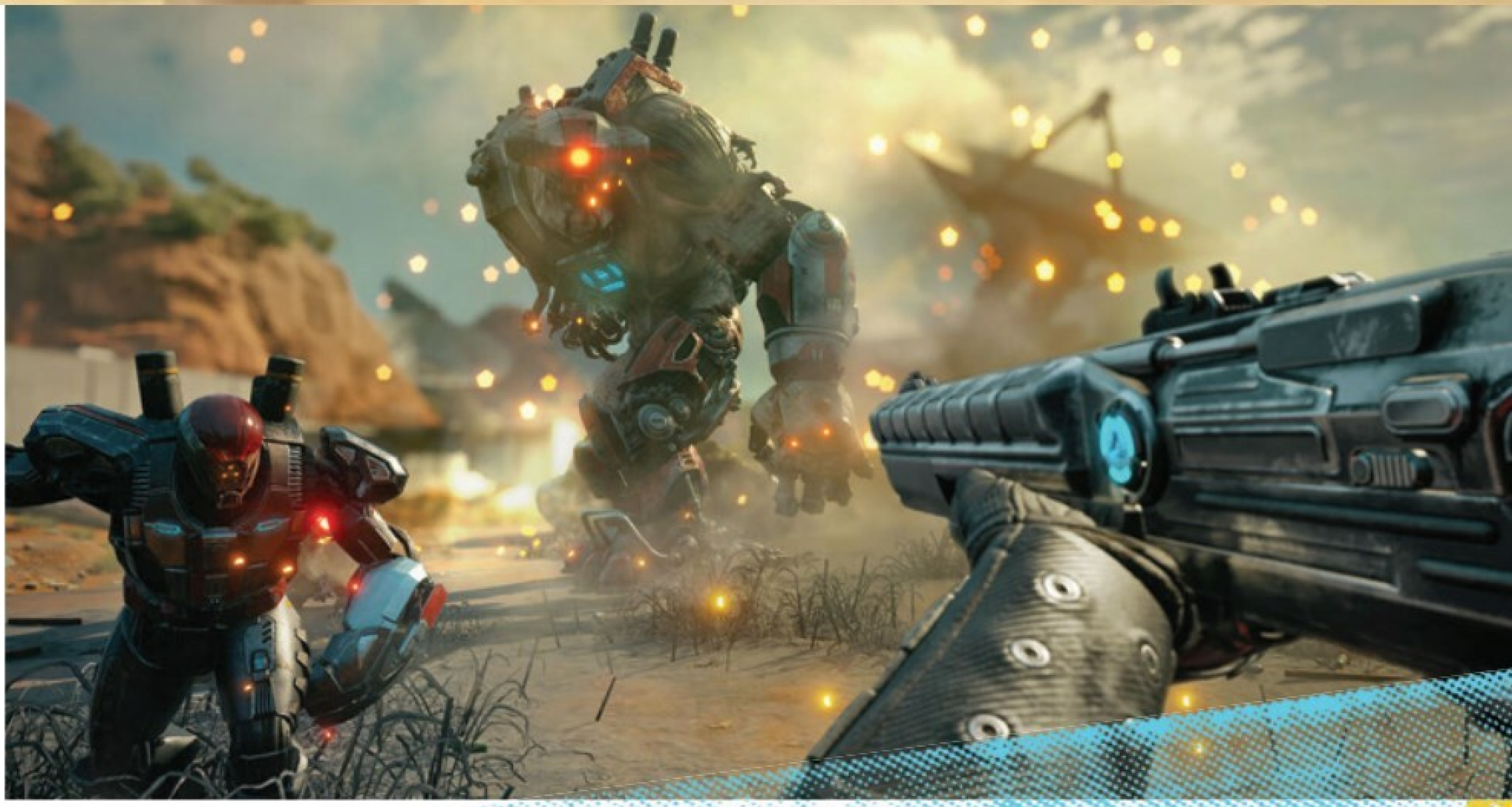
ROUGHIN' IT

While the original Rage had multiplayer and folks who love Borderlands might be looking at Rage's sequel in hopes of a good old time in the wasteland with buds, it might be disappointing to hear that Rage 2 won't have any multiplayer component. Id and Avalanche envisioned Rage 2 as a single-player experience and has no plans for any multiplayer – co-op, deathmatch, or otherwise. You and your buds will have to build a blood-soaked sense of camaraderie elsewhere.

Bethesda also says that there won't be any mods available for the PC launch. However, the company has left the door open for the future: "We understand this is important to our community and we will investigate this at a later date."

When you're not shooting, you'll be driving, and sometimes racing

up with the Authority to take on both me and Hagar. Great. The door opens and I'm greeted by a hulking behemoth of a mutant named Ruckus The Crusher that's at least 10 times my size. He throws giant rocks at me and beats me with his fists. It takes a few hundred rounds but eventually he goes down. I grab some ammo and health infusions in the next room and spend the next five minutes in an intense firefight with Clayton's goons, tearing them to shreds with the assault rifle. Eventually I emerge into Wellspring only to watch Clayton fly away in a helicopter while Hagar curses. An explosion happens above and a massive neon sign lands in front of me to let me know that the demo is over. I'm surprised by how disappointed I am that I'll have to wait until the game's release to feed Clayton a fistful of his trashy pompadour, but luckily there's still more of Rage to see.



GOON SWAD

Powerful weapons like rocket launchers and laser cannons are hidden throughout the world. Best get to finding, bucko

VIOLENT DELIGHTS AND VIOLENT ENDS

After the demo ended, Avalanche demonstrates some aspects of the game I couldn't see during the hands-on demo. The most important one was seeing the rest of the world beyond the desert. In the time between the games, the world itself has changed, with spheres called ECOpods terraforming the earth to make it habitable again after the meteor wiped out most of civilization in the game. "We wanted to move away from the dark, drab world of 50 shades of brown," Willits says. "Life has returned to the wasteland. We have biomes that have life and richness to them."

Nedfors boards one of the other vehicles available to the player, a gyrocopter, and quickly zips around the world, avoiding enemy fire with ease until they reach a swampy marshland that's home to the biker gang-like faction the River Hogs. "We wanted to show a wasteland that was lush," Alhgren says. A number of biomes exist throughout the world that have been born from the ECOpods, including a thriving jungle area. While we didn't get to see those, the swampy biome makes for a markedly different look than the standard barren wasteland aesthetic of most post-apocalyptic fiction. The swamp's bubbles hiss and pop, while steam rises to enshroud approaching foes in junkyards. If such care is taken with the other areas in the game, Rage 2 should be a visually distinct place that is fun to explore for the sights alone. The attempt to diversify the setting is one I appreciate given that most post-apocalyptic games seem content to occupy the same color palette and makes Rage 2 stand out from the crowd.

I also saw several weapons that I didn't get to use in the hands-on demo, including a gravity gun called the G.R.A.B.S. Tumble Gun that's quite different from Half-Life 2's signature weapon. Rage's edition has you firing bullets that stick to foes. After you've stuck an enemy you can aim somewhere else and click the alternate fire button, forcing the foe (or object) you've stuck to fly toward wherever you're aiming. The more bullets you stick in someone, the harder they'll be thrown. It's a neat toy that gives you another way besides Shatter to throw foes and objects about in the game's space. I also saw a laser cannon that gets more powerful the longer you keep firing it but will also overheat if you fire too much, and a railgun that's useful for sniping. Each weapon is distinct and powerful in both how it sounds and how it can be used tactically, giving creative players a lot of tools to work with when it comes to wreaking havoc and playful experimentation. "We wanted to have fun with [Rage 2]," Willits says. "We have some dark humor. We have some things that are serious but overall if you're having a good time, you're laughing and enjoying what you're doing, that's a good game for us."

Rage 2 is due out early next year and to be frank, I'm excited to get back to it. Not only does it look to be a marked improvement over its solid predecessor, but the combo-oriented combat is extremely promising and addictive. The world is shaping up to be a fun, visually diverse place to explore with more than enough activities, enticing story beats, and a sturdy progression system to make becoming the biggest badass in the land an adventure worth taking. I cannot wait to ride like hell into this colorful wasteland once more, a bloody steering wheel gripped in one hand and my trusty assault rifle in the other.

For more on Rage 2, visit our hub at gameinformer.com/rage2. You'll find information on powers, open-world activities, and what Rage fans can expect from the future of the burgeoning franchise

The Authority, the first game's villains, return and are deadlier than ever

A NEW HUNTER EMERGES

The Abzû creators head onto dry land with The Pathless, an open-world game that pushes Giant Squid in bold new directions

The hunter walks through the woods, then sees her target in the distance: a cursed animal, emanating disease in a fiery, distorted haze. Her pace quickens, and she bears down on what's now identifiable as a deer. With a fluid motion, she draws her bow and releases a quick succession of enchanted arrows. The target staggers, and is downed by one last strike from the hunter's eagle companion. Approaching the animal, the hunter kneels and recites a short prayer. The curse is lifted, and the liberated deer bounds off into the wilderness. It's a noble act, one of many to come. An entire island must be cleansed if the hunter is to succeed in her quest – and not everything is as docile as the deer. This is The Pathless, the latest game from developer Giant Squid, which stands as both a complement and contrast to what came before. **BY JEFF CORK**

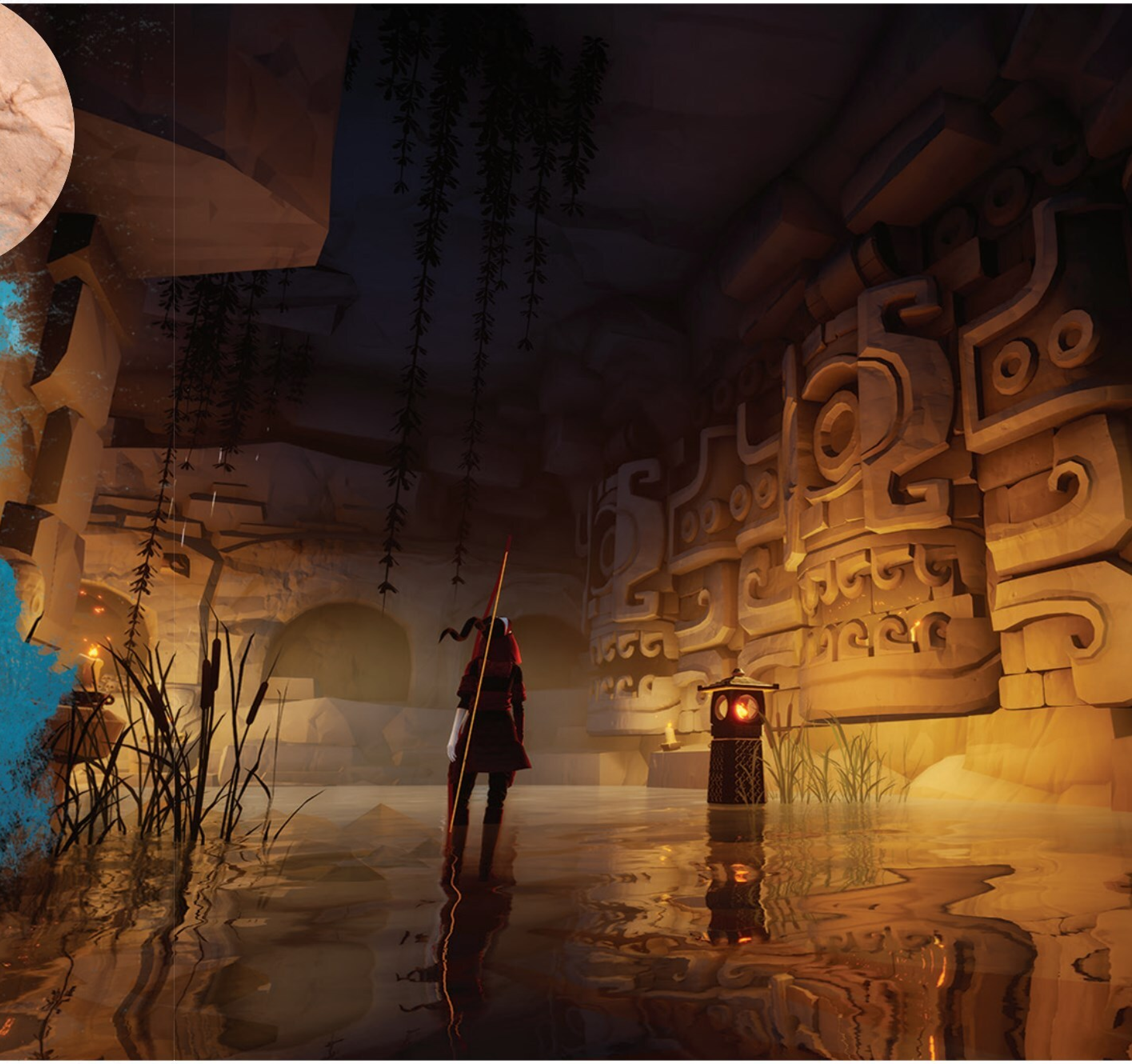
» **PLATFORM** PS4 • PC (Other consoles TBA) » **STYLE** 1-Player Action
» **PUBLISHER** Annapurna Games » **DEVELOPER** Giant Squid » **RELEASE** 2019

Giant Squid's Matt Nava helped shape some of the most well-known games in the indie space during his time as an art director at Thatgamecompany. That studio made a name for itself early in the PS3 era with meditative, experiential games like Flower and Journey. After leaving the company, Nava co-founded Giant Squid, where he serves as creative director. His new team's first game was Abzû, an underwater adventure that followed similar themes of exploration and renewal.

"After working on Flower, Journey, and Abzû, I was thinking to myself, 'I kind of want to do something a little more fast-paced, with a little more action in it,'" Nava tells me during a recent visit to the studio's Los Angeles offices. He says one of the things he's liked most about his previous works was their sense of atmosphere. "I was like, what if we start with that but give it this sense of adventure and action that I haven't really done before?"

Nava started conceptualizing the game that would become The Pathless about two years ago, as Abzû was finishing up. Development on Abzû started before Giant Squid had assembled its entire team, a situation Nava likens to laying down track in front of a moving train. "When we were hiring we were like, 'Do you want to work on this game?' 'Yeah? OK, great.'" Those new hires knew what they were in for. Following Abzû's release, he was in the position of having to convince his team to work on his next idea. A few members moved on, but the core remained to start work on The Pathless. "Luckily, whew," Nava says. "It's always a trick to make that transition to the next one."

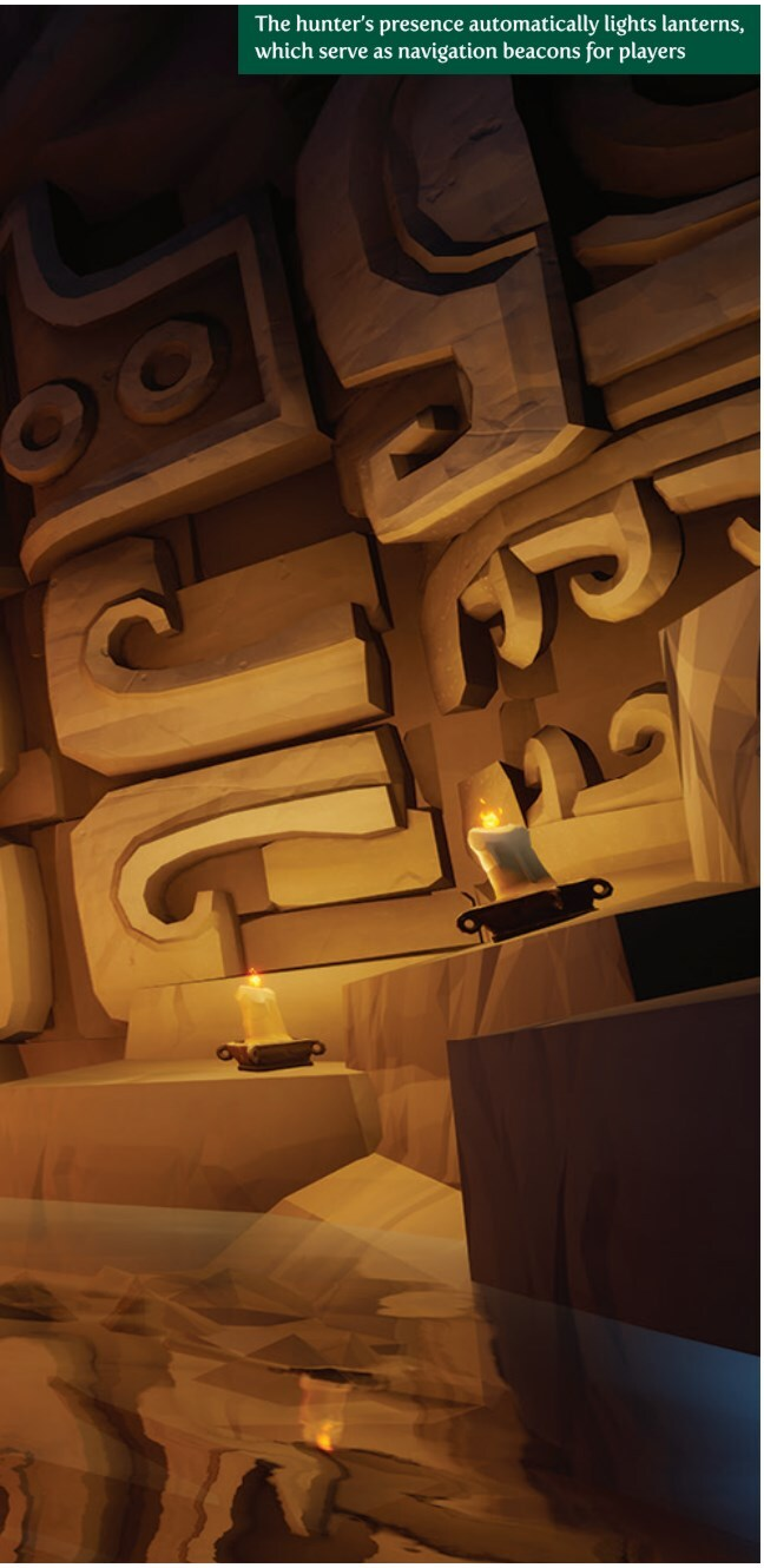
Giant Squid currently has 11 team members, so getting them on board was critical. Fortunately, everyone seems excited about the opportunity to branch out a bit. "We're at a point now where it's time for us to try some more stuff," says lead gameplay programmer Cosmo Fumo. "I think Journey was really cool and Abzû was really cool, but it was a similar style in terms of, there's a limited amount of interaction you have with the world, because you don't have a lot of tools as a character. Giving the character something to do in the world is interesting, and I think it's been a big part of the design."



ISLAND OF MYSTERY

The Pathless begins with the hunter arriving on the island's sandy shores. It's an impressive piece of land, home to snow-capped mountains, redwood forests, plateaus, and the ruins of a former civilization. It's also been cursed for 1,000 years. The nature of that curse is as unknown to the hunter as it is to the player, and both will uncover those mysteries simultaneously. The ultimate goal for the player is to find a way atop a chunk of rock that floats ominously above the rest of the island. Is that the source of the curse? There's only one way to find out, but it's not going to be easy.

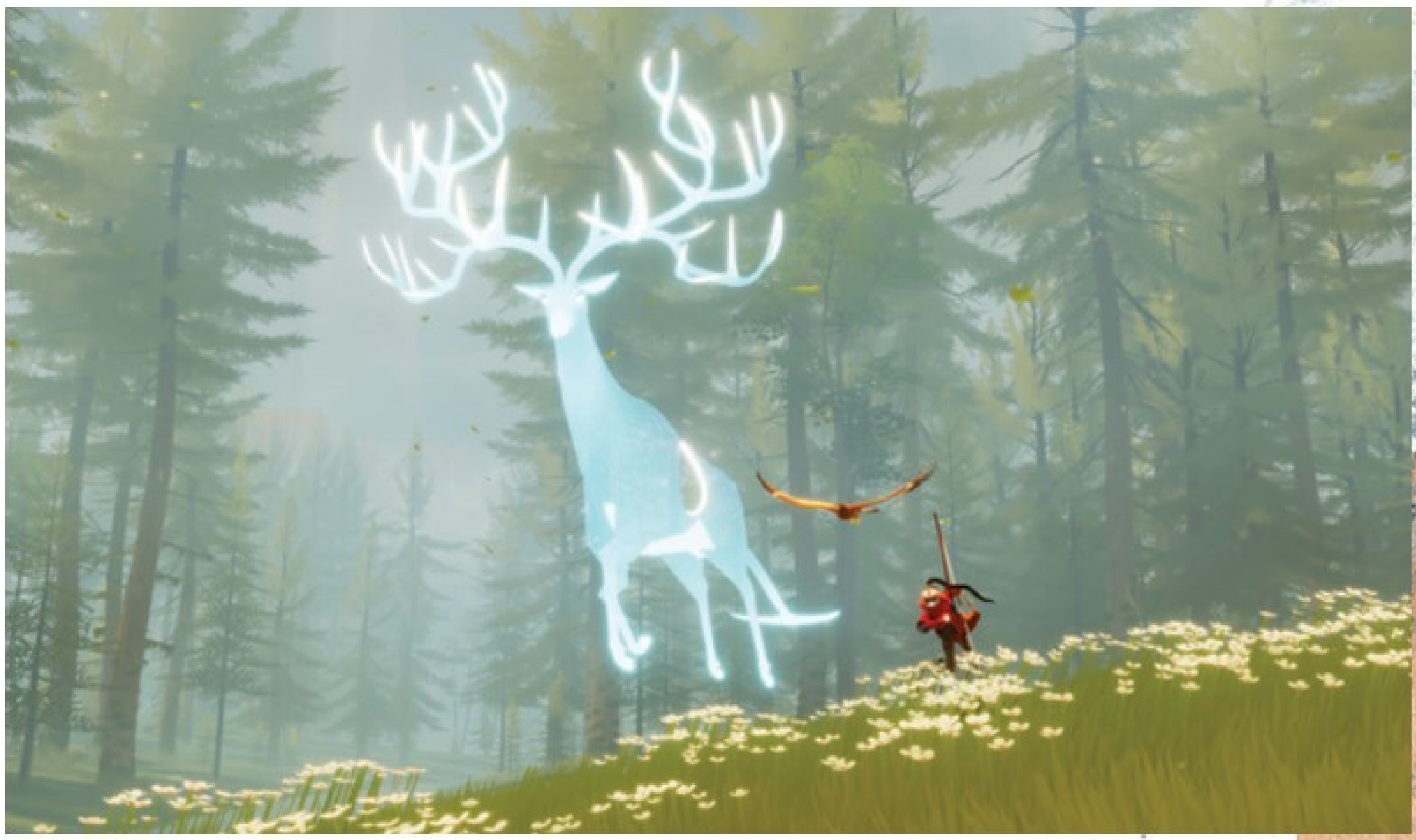
Giant Squid is tackling a variety of new things with The Pathless, most notably setting their game in an open world. Players can choose to explore the island however they like; there's no strict path to follow, as its title implies. "Actually, Abzû was originally designed as an open-world game, and due to the constraints of the design we ended up scrapping that idea," Fuma says. "So this was our second shot. We still have verticality, obviously, but it's a lot simpler to think about in terms of layers rather than these crazy cave systems." I didn't get a sense of just how big the entire island is, but Nava says the game is designed for players to be able to see it through to its conclusion in two or three sessions.

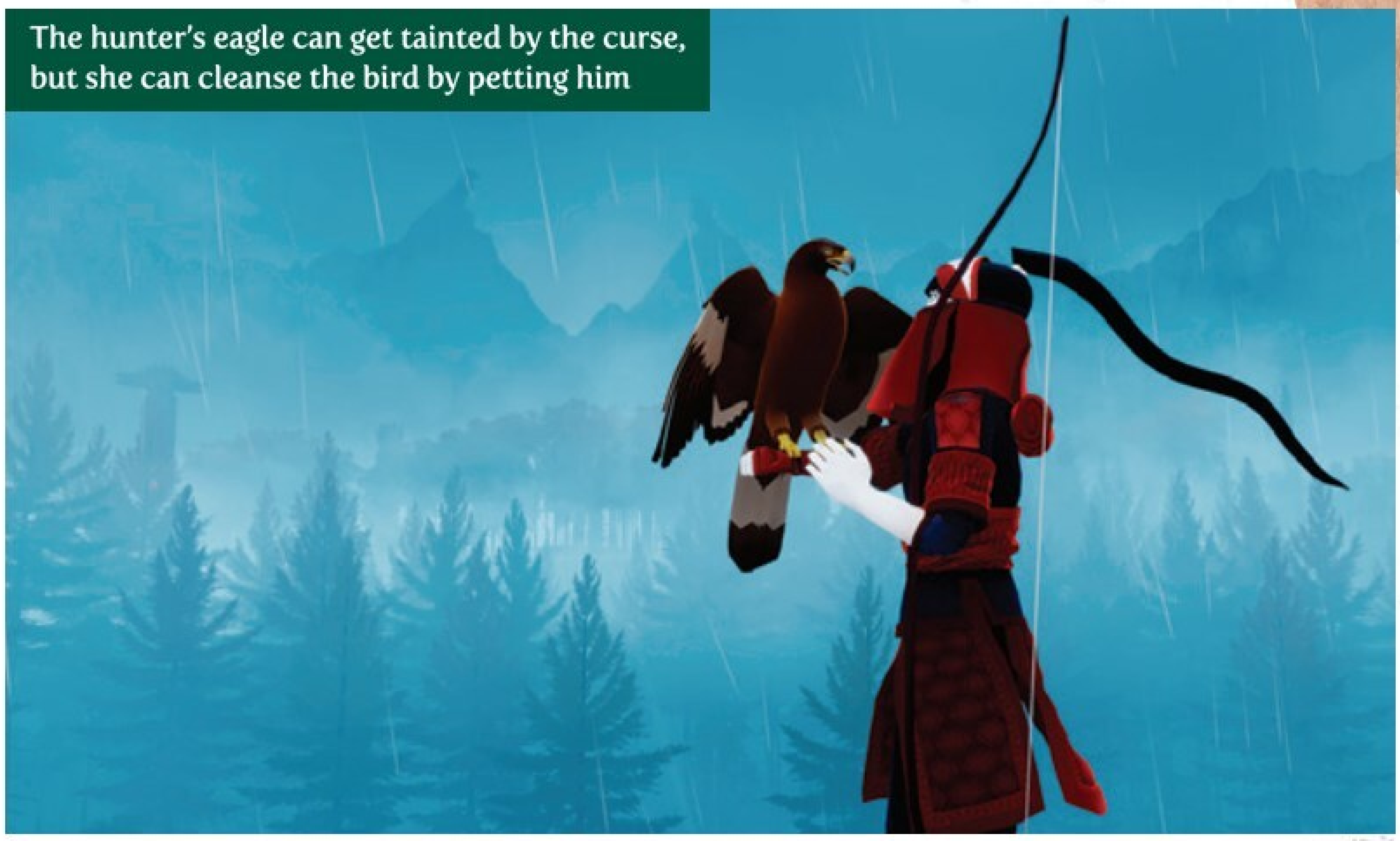

The hunter's presence automatically lights lanterns, which serve as navigation beacons for players

The island is designed as a series of tiered levels, and getting to each one is a big part of the challenge. Fortunately, you have an eagle. He can't just fly you around at will, however. You're lithe and fast, but not exactly lightweight. Instead, Nava says the eagle is similar to the cuccos from the Zelda games. It can provide a controlled glide down when you first start out. He can also propel the player upward with the mighty flap of its wings, but it's not free. When the hunter lifts the curse from an animal, she claims a droplet of mysterious energy. Its origins might not be clear for now, but its utility is: Each flap of the eagle's wings costs a droplet. At first, the bird will have to touch down before using another flap, but eventually he can ascend several times per flight.

The world is filled with optional secrets to explore, such as ruins and areas that provide additional slices of the underlying story and crystals that can be used to upgrade the hunter, such as expanding her spirit bar (more on that in a bit). While you explore each section, you're also being hunted by twisted versions of what were once noble gods. I get to see this in action in an encounter with the cursed elk.

This creature was once a towering and noble beast, but now it's been corrupted by the curse. You know you're close to it when you see a reddish fog. Linger in it too long, and embers begin to rise from the ground. The beast then blasts into view – an eight-legged monstrosity covered in fire, with a long tail and rack of flaming horns. You can scare it away, but that's only a temporary solution. To rid the beast of its curse, and in turn, the island, you need to defeat it. Easier said than done, since it's as wily as it is fearsome.




The hunter's eagle can get tainted by the curse, but she can cleanse the bird by petting him

THE ABZÛNIVERSE?

During my demo, I couldn't help but notice similarities between Abzû and The Pathless, such as common architectural motifs and themes of renewal – as well as the concept of using droplets to cleanse corruption. Creative director Matt Nava invites players to draw connections between the two games. "It's all related," he says. "We have this concept in Abzû of this magical water, and you go into the spirit realm there. One of the things that we're trying to see if we can connect right now is the spirits that you're freeing in this game, are they from the same pantheon?"

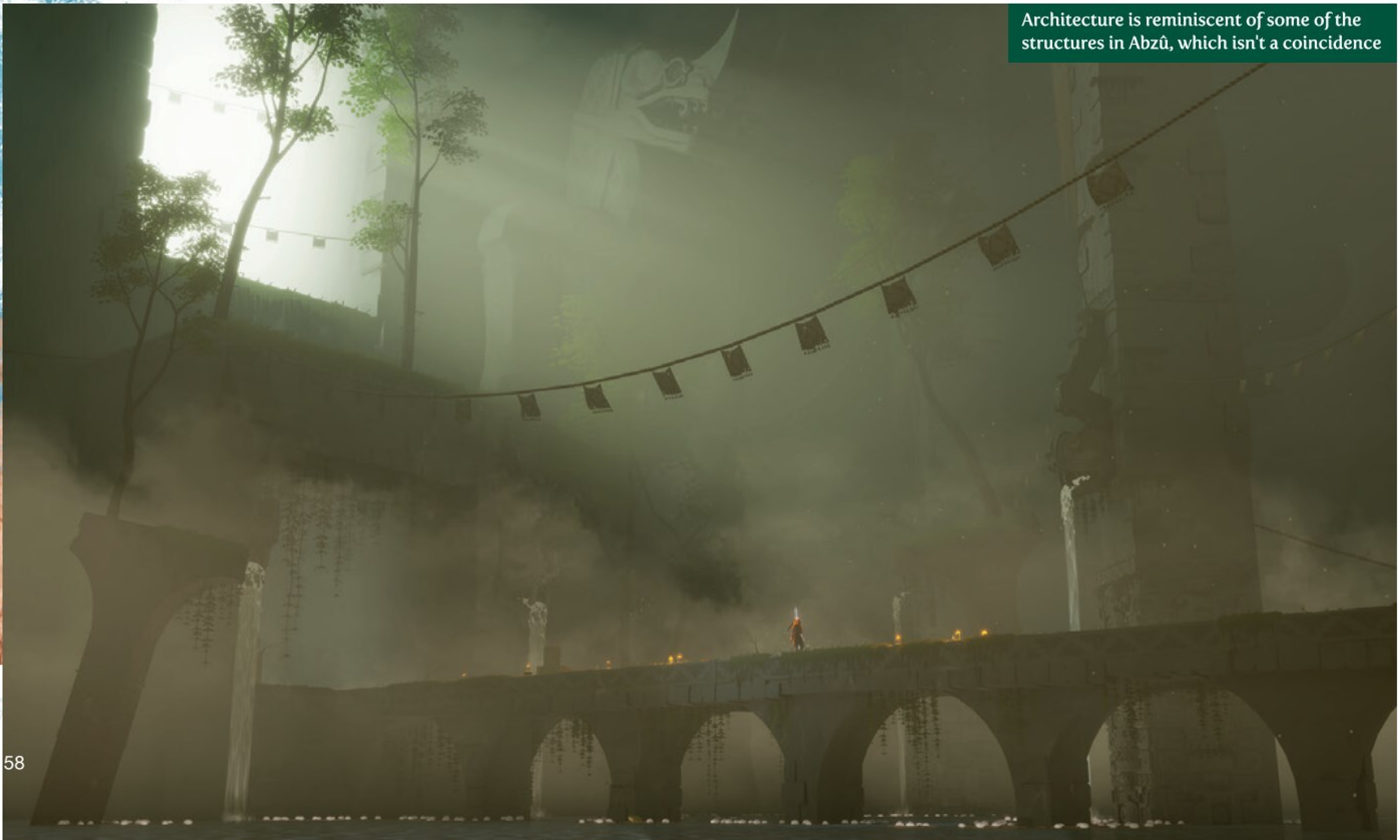
The hunter can also equip a special mask to get a glimpse into the spirit world (and for the player to see points of interest easier). "Is it the same spirit world when you're looking through the mask? Are you seeing the space that you go into in Abzû? Those are all connections that we're drawing and we're hoping that people pick up on, like that," Nava says. "Those droplets are related."

Those droplets you get from hunting small game have additional utility: Each section of the island has several ancient obelisks. The hunter can spend droplets at these locations, whereupon these small stone towers emit a tracking beam that highlights the corrupted beast's location. Unlock three obelisks, and the hunter can go on the offensive by moving to the place the beams converge.

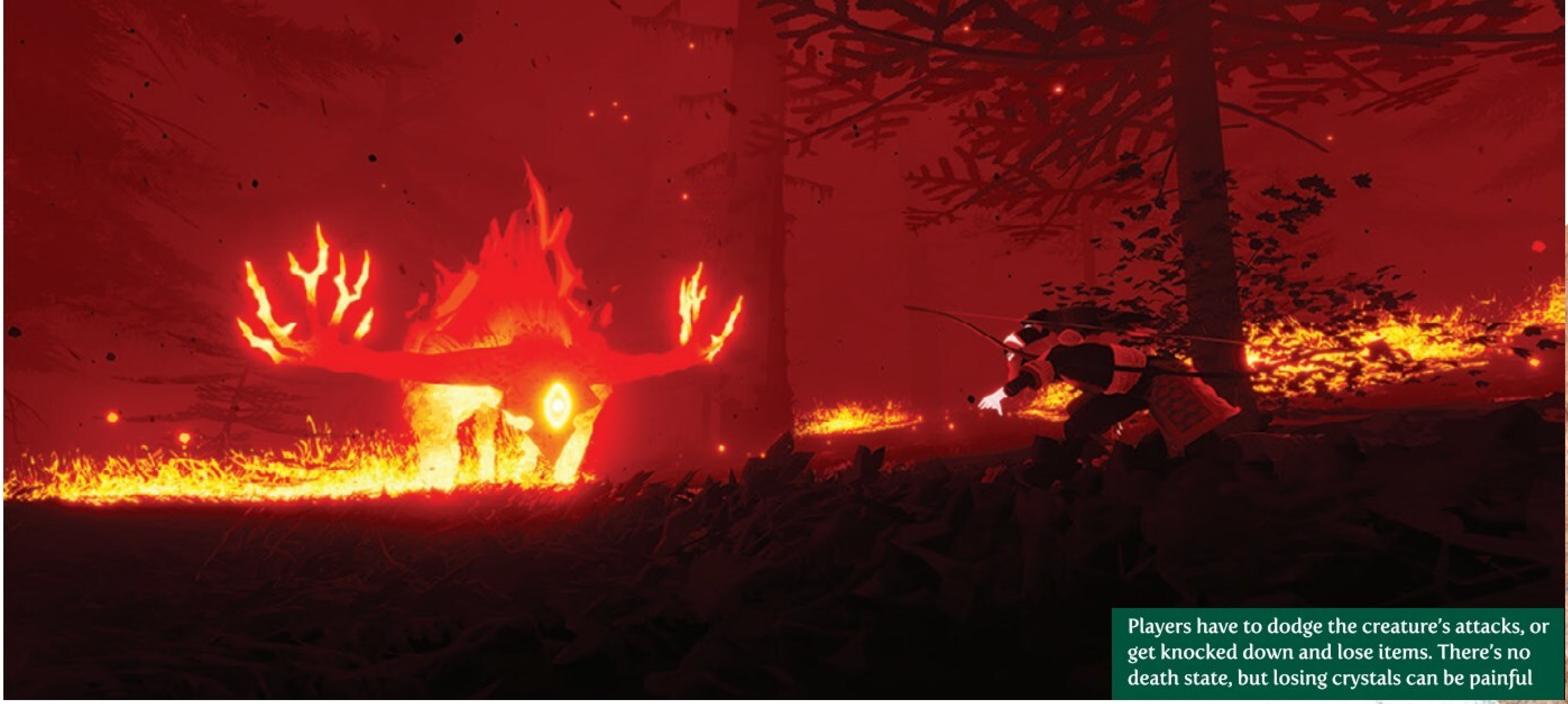
Once there, the beast goes on the run, which leads to a thrilling chase sequence. The hunter has to follow closely, avoiding fire and trees as the corrupted elk retreats to its final last-stand location. Get too far behind, and you'll have to track it all over again. "In earlier versions of the game, we didn't have the shrine obelisks, and it was just like, 'Hey, if you find him you can chase him down,'" Nava says. "We didn't even have him hunting you, because we thought we just want to have this cool chase. Then we realized that without that part, the player had no reason to chase the guy. We need you to hate this guy so you want to chase him."

The eventual boss battle takes place in an arena-like ruin, which is reminiscent of Abzû's underwater shrines. Now cornered, the creature makes its last stand, unleashing waves of fiery rings and swinging its tail at the hunter. She methodically blasts away at targets on the creature's body, eventually knocking a horn off in the process. "I've never done boss fights before, but they're super fun to make," Nava says. "This is the kind of stuff, when you're making a game like Abzû, where you're like, 'I want to put fireballs in, but I can't!' And now we get to do all that stuff and tie it all in."

He cuts the demo short before the creature falls, but skips ahead to show the aftermath. Once the creature is defeated, its curse is lifted and it becomes a spectral elk. "At this point it's going to be easier to find the secrets; you can go around and get all the crystals without being harassed by the guy," Nava says. Players can also find the elk god in the world and chase it again, though it's a far less confrontational encounter. If they're successful, they'll be rewarded with secrets. Once a portion of the island is cleansed, all the remaining animals in that section are freed from the curse as well. They won't flee from the hunter, and will follow her in the same way fish were drawn to the diver in Abzû.



Architecture is reminiscent of some of the structures in Abzû, which isn't a coincidence



Players have to dodge the creature's attacks, or get knocked down and lose items. There's no death state, but losing crystals can be painful

THE THRILL OF THE HUNTER

Characters in Journey could jump, slide, and chirp. In Abzû, your diver was able to deftly navigate the depths and use basic interactions to repair drones and restore life to the undersea world. While atmospheric and memorable, to Fumo's point, players weren't exactly overwhelmed with options. The Pathless' hunter is a refreshing change of pace. While her bow might invite comparisons to Lara Croft and her eagle companion seems like something from Assassin's Creed, the hunter uses both in ways I've never quite seen before.

Nava says he loves games with shooting mechanics, but that he hasn't been completely on board with how they've been implemented in the past. "A lot of games, like every game with shooting, you've got this reticle in the center of the screen, and you've got the right stick and you've got to line up these two axes to put your [target] behind the reticle and then 'boom!'" That can be especially tricky when you're playing as an agile character who is expected to move while accurately shooting. Games like The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild incorporate slow-motion to allow players to temporarily stop focusing on movement and shift their attention to aiming. "What I really want for this game is to not have to make that compromise," Nava says.

The Pathless' cursed-island is littered with talismans, which hover over the ground. Players can shoot them by holding down the right trigger. Once pressed, a diamond-shaped meter is superimposed over the target, filling quickly. When it's completely filled, the hunter will fire the arrow after the trigger is released. So long as nothing is between the arrow and its target – say, for example, a tree – the shot will find its way to its target with 100-percent accuracy. Release it before it's filled, and the accuracy decreases accordingly. "The whole point of this game is to make you feel like this super-cool hunter who can just do awesome stuff. You're not missing shots, it's easy to make shots, because that's what the hunter does. That's what she's good at."

While it's designed to be approachable, there's an additional layer of depth for players who choose to engage with it. There's a little pip halfway through the targeting meter, and players who can successfully time their trigger release at the right moment can fire off accurate shots in half the time. "You can play the whole game without doing a single skillshot," Nava says. "You can charge it and get normal shots, but if you do the skillshots, you're going to be able to shoot again faster and chain things faster and potentially get longer chains."

Chains are another key part of The Pathless' design. The hunter isn't just smashing talismans for fun; when they're shattered, she gets a little boost to her spirit meter. That meter governs her ability to sprint. I see how it works in a brief hands-on demo. The hunter is speedy, and I love the way she hunkers down like a speed skater while bounding across the plateau. Unfortunately, that moment is fleeting, as I quickly run out of spirit meter. Once I get into the rhythm of hitting talismans while running to keep my meter topped off, jumping toward the next one, hitting mid-air chains, and pulling off skillshots, it's an incredible feeling. Maintaining momentum is exhilarating, and it truly does feel like I'm playing along with a great hunter instead of clumsily moving her body around like an untalented puppeteer.

SOMETHING TO LOOK FORWARD TO

The demo skipped around a fair bit, and certain sections were clearly works in progress, but The Pathless is already shaping up to be something special. Even from my limited time on the sticks, I could tell that mastering the hunter's movements would be particularly satisfying, in the same way grinding from rail to rail in the Tony Hawk games was back in the day.

The team's been working on the game in silence for a few years, and now they're finally ready to start sharing their efforts with the world – and not a moment too soon, according to environment artist Bryce Warner. "You lose energy as the production goes on, because you can't tell anyone about it," he says. "As soon as you can tell people you get all this energy back as you show people what you're working on, and it drives you to want to complete it."

We don't have long to wait, if all goes according to plan. The Pathless is set for a release sometime next year on consoles and PC. ◆

Anthem

Suiting up for action

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
Online Multiplayer Shooter

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

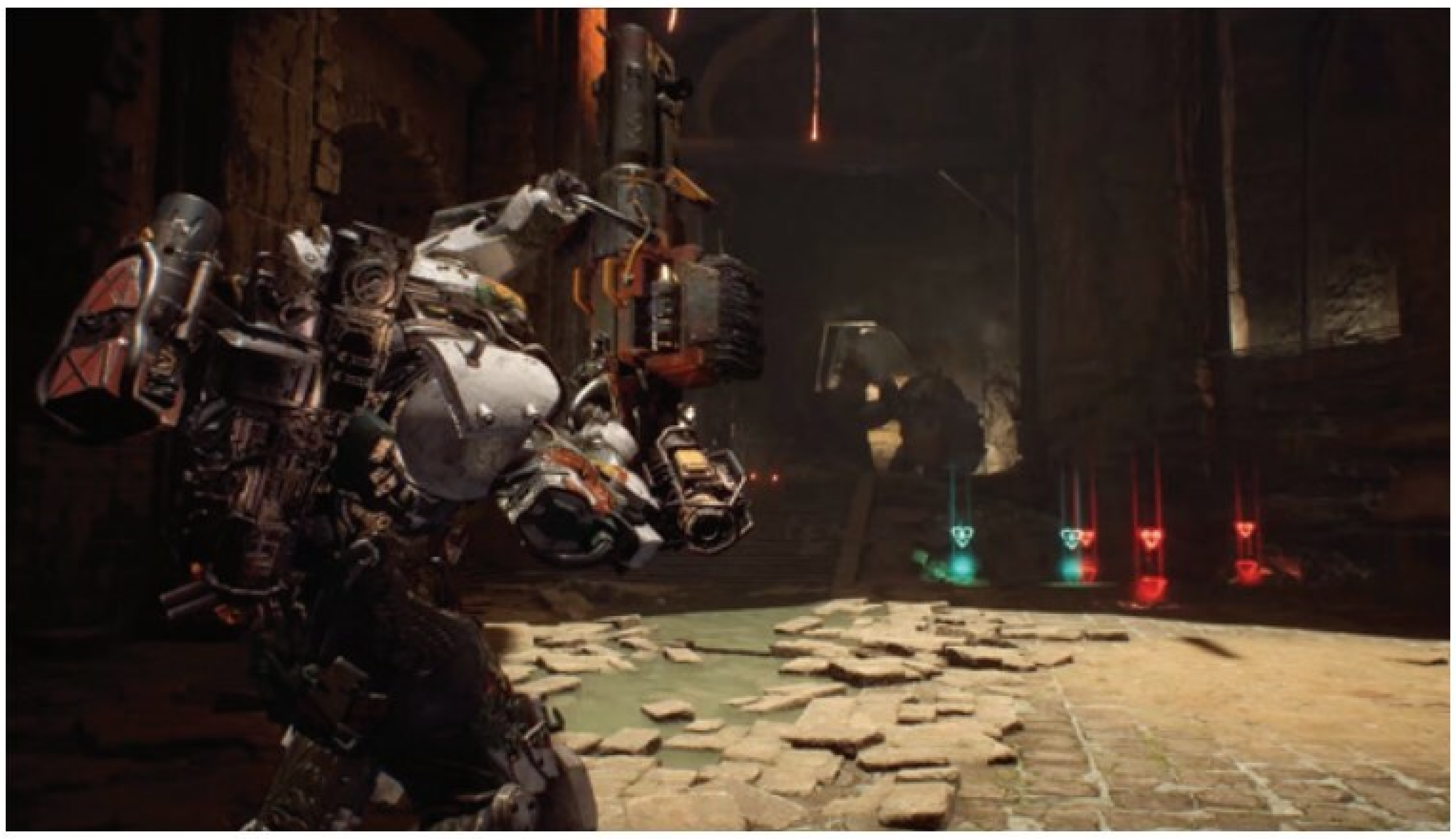
» **Developer**
BioWare

» **Release**
February 22

Anthem is about a lot of things, like exploring a huge world, teaming up with friends, and making choices that shape your story. However, almost everything you do in BioWare's upcoming online shooter orbits a single, central element: powered exosuits called javelins. This technology allows you to take flight and soar into Anthem's dangerous wilderness, and how you fight the foes you encounter there is determined by the javelin you're piloting. Anthem has four types of javelin, and with a variety of customization options for each, you have plenty of ways to set yourself apart.

BioWare has previously talked about the role three of the javelins play; the colossus is a tank with heavy weapons, the ranger balances firepower and mobility, and the storm is like an elemental-infused mage. The studio recently pulled back the curtain on the fourth javelin, called the interceptor. "The interceptor is sort of like our rogue class, designed for hit-and-run combat with some support skills mixed in," says lead producer Mike Gamble. "It's really quick, so you want to get in, attack enemies with your blades, and then get out before they have a chance to retaliate. It's also got a variety of glaives and throwables that can inflict status ailments and debuffs. Interceptor is fun because it's a high-precision javelin, and you're constantly darting in and out of danger to get the most out of combat."

The interceptor's playstyle is enticing when you imagine yourself as a lone wolf cutting foes down, but it gets even more attractive as part of a group. Anthem is an always-online game with an emphasis on four-player



Your First Skill

In addition to the various upgrades and improvements you make to your javelins, your pilot (called a freelancer) also has a set of skills to invest in. While BioWare isn't revealing the full scope of those abilities, we do know which freelancer skill you should prioritize first. "Flight!" says lead producer Mike Gamble. "The more you put into your flight and overheat skill, the longer you can stay airborne without needing to land or find a way to cool your jets. Flying and hovering is crucial to combat in Anthem, so you definitely want to improve that skill area as fast as you can."

co-op (though the main story content can be played solo), and that's when the action is at its best. "Every javelin has a role, so they're highly capable on their own, but you really unlock their full potential as part of a team," Gamble says. "For instance, a storm by itself is formidable because it can do a lot of AOE damage and do a bit of crowd control, but it's also got a fairly weak shield and can't take a lot of damage. However, if you pair up a storm with a colossus that can draw aggro, then you can fly around the battlefield setting up combos and helping teammates with tougher enemies." That doesn't mean every group needs to be perfectly balanced all the time; BioWare is looking forward to seeing the inventive ways players push themselves, like all-storm squads tackling challenging late-game content.

Even if you have an all-storm squad, each javelin is visually distinct. Players can make an impressive variety of adjustments to customize their javelins' appearance. First of all, you earn new armor pieces as you play, and you can equip them to different slots on your javelin like helmet, arms, legs, and chest. These modifications change the silhouette of your suit, but you can go a step further by changing the texture of these components; you can select different pieces and regions on your javelin and change the material setting, choosing from a range of metal and cloth. Once you're happy there, you can apply vinyls and custom paint jobs (and create your own color palettes) to tie the whole visual look together. For a final flourish of personalization, you can change some of your animations, like landing and victory poses. With options like that, running into another player who looks just like you seems pretty unlikely.

Anthem launches in a few months, but fans will learn more (and even play a demo) before then. Beyond that, the community will continue to hear new things about Anthem even after its initial release, since it is a live service. BioWare will fold tweaks, additions, and new content into the game and change its composition over time. What exactly can we expect in that area? "We haven't gotten into full details of what we're doing on the live-service front yet, but I'll just say we're not taking anything off the table," Gamble says. "We'll be doing a lot of small things daily and weekly like tweaking day and night cycles and introducing storms and other weather effects that will impact gameplay, but we have some much, much bigger things planned as well!" » **Joe Juba**

Assassin's Creed Odyssey

An ambitious post-release rollout

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Ubisoft

» Developer
Ubisoft Quebec

» Release
December through Spring

Ubisoft's latest incarnation of the Assassin's Creed franchise was well received, with many fans and critics appreciating the revamped RPG and combat systems, the richly imagined take on ancient Greece, and the interwoven narratives that pushed forward juicy details on some of the franchise's biggest mysteries, including the First Civilization. In the wake of that release, the developers have announced one of the most aggressive post-launch DLC plans in series history. We asked some of the team members for more details about what is on the way in the next few months.

The most exciting and robust new content comes in the form of two story arcs that are part of the game's season pass, during which you play through as your chosen hero of Kassandra or Alexios. Each arc is split up into three smaller episodes, releasing at roughly six-week intervals beginning in December and running through the spring. "We want to offer our players the same options to enjoy our content as they would have for their favorite TV show," says game director Scott Phillips. "They have the possibility to jump on new episodes as they premiere, or experience those epic new adventures in their entirety once all episodes are available."

Players should get an initial taste through the first episode of Legacy of the First Blade, where we'll meet Darius, a figure hinted at way back in Assassin's Creed II, as the man who took down the Persian king Xerxes. "Darius has been made what I would call an honorary Assassin in the eyes of the Brotherhood," says associate narrative director Joel Janisse. "He's an icon. The man who embodied the ethos of the Assassins centuries before there was an official Brotherhood. But in the Legacy of the First Blade we meet the man behind that legend: A grizzled Persian warrior who has lived a hard life on the run." Darius is the earliest character to use the hidden blade, which also happens to be the exact same blade that is eventually used by Bayek in Origins.

In the new expansion story, Darius is now an older man who has been fleeing for his life as he encounters Kassandra or Alexios. "We'll confront those that Darius is running from, the Order of the Ancients, the same organization Bayek and Aya came up against in Assassin's Creed Origins," Janisse says. "Some characters we already know from the main game, like Barnabas, will have important roles to play as well in Legacy of the First Blade."

A second story arc is also on the way this spring, which turns the focus back to one of the most intriguing elements of the Odyssey storyline – the lost city of Atlantis. "When we started working on Assassin's Creed Odyssey, we knew that we needed to strongly weave together elements of the Greek mythology and the Assassins Creed lore of the First Civilization," Phillips says. "Within Odyssey we explained that the mythical creatures were guardians of and corrupted by First Civilization technology. In Fate of Atlantis we will take that connection even further." In addition, this second DLC arc has significant carry over to the ongoing present-day storyline, with more details about Layla's connection to the fabled underwater city.

Beyond major episodic story arcs, season pass owners are also getting full remasters of Assassin's Creed III and Assassin's Creed III: Liberation. "Most of the assets, like 3D models

Ubisoft has already raised the level cap since the core game, and it may do so again over the course of the DLC

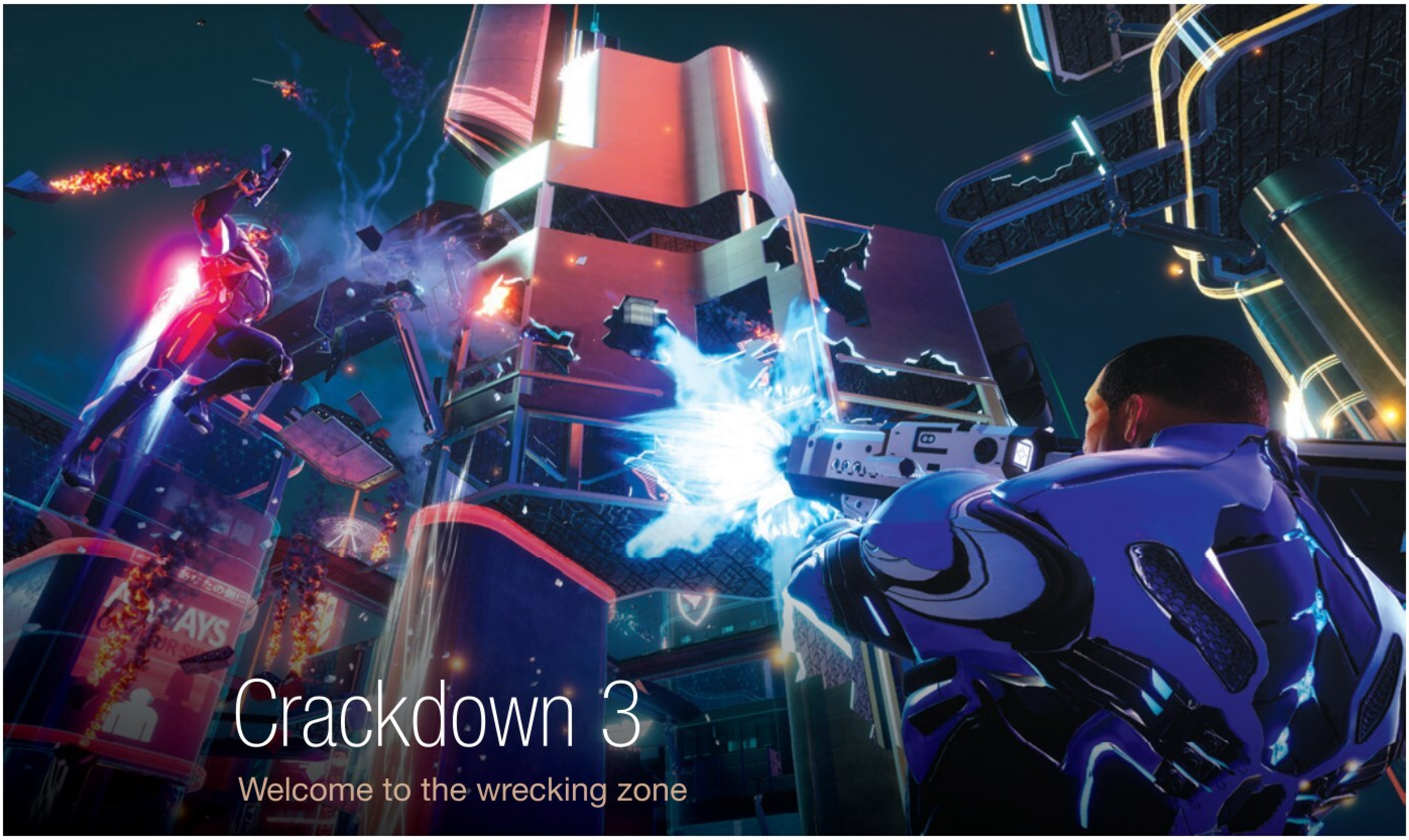
or textures, have been completely redesigned," says associate producer Daniel Olaya. Modern tools like physically based rendering and full floating point rendering help Connor's adventure take on new visual flair. On PS4 Pro and Xbox One X, Assassin's Creed III runs in 4K and HDR. In addition, the team has also addressed some of the in-game systems to bring them up to date, like improved menus and user interfaces.

Beyond the season pass, a bevy of other content is going out to all players in the game, some of which is already unfolding in-game, including new story quests dubbed "lost tales of Greece," new epic mercenary and ship battles every week, and occasional new mythic monsters, like the recently released Cyclops fight.

Finally, following in the footsteps of the stellar educational twist on Assassin's Creed Origins, Ubisoft is pulling together a new Discovery Tour mode for Assassin's Creed Odyssey, which allows students of history to explore the three-dimensional world of ancient Greece like a museum as they take tours, learn about cultural elements and historical figures, and bring the time period to life. The mode is free to anyone who owns the core game.

Game publishers are increasingly seeking ways to keep their big games on the minds and hard drives of players for longer stretches, and Assassin's Creed Odyssey's robust approach to post-release content offers a powerful motivator for continued engagement in a single-player experience. In the past, DLC episodes have sometimes lagged in quality behind the core; if Ubisoft can turn that trend around with meaningful stories and gameplay, we may still be talking about Odyssey well into 2019. » **Matt Miller**

The hidden blade wielded by Darius is the same one that Bayek will one day strap to his arm



Crackdown 3

Welcome to the wrecking zone

» **Platform**
Xbox One

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(10-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Microsoft Studios

» **Developer**
Sumo Digital

» **Release**
February 13

Originally announced in 2014, Crackdown 3 has been flanked by a delay nearly every time it has popped its head out of the ground for gameplay reveals. The latest release date adjustment, to February 13, however, truly feels like the last delay. Hopefully the next time we talk about Crackdown 3, it will be our hands-on impressions, and not us continuing to marvel at how it has moved a full three years past its initial 2016 release window.

Up to this point, we've mostly seen (and played) the single-player portion of Crackdown 3, firing off rockets into buildings and bad guys and taking high-flying leaps into the air. The latest look at the game, during Microsoft's XO 2018 conference, highlighted the destructibility of the world alongside the new Wrecking Zone mode.

The iconic voice of Michael McConnohie, who voiced the agency director/narrator in Crackdown and its sequel, explains that the Wrecking Zone mode is a five-versus-five multiplayer battle. It takes place in the "ultimate combat arena" where quite literally everything can be destroyed. A group of five agents dressed in familiar blue take on a group of five other agents dressed in red, doing their best to destroy everything around them.

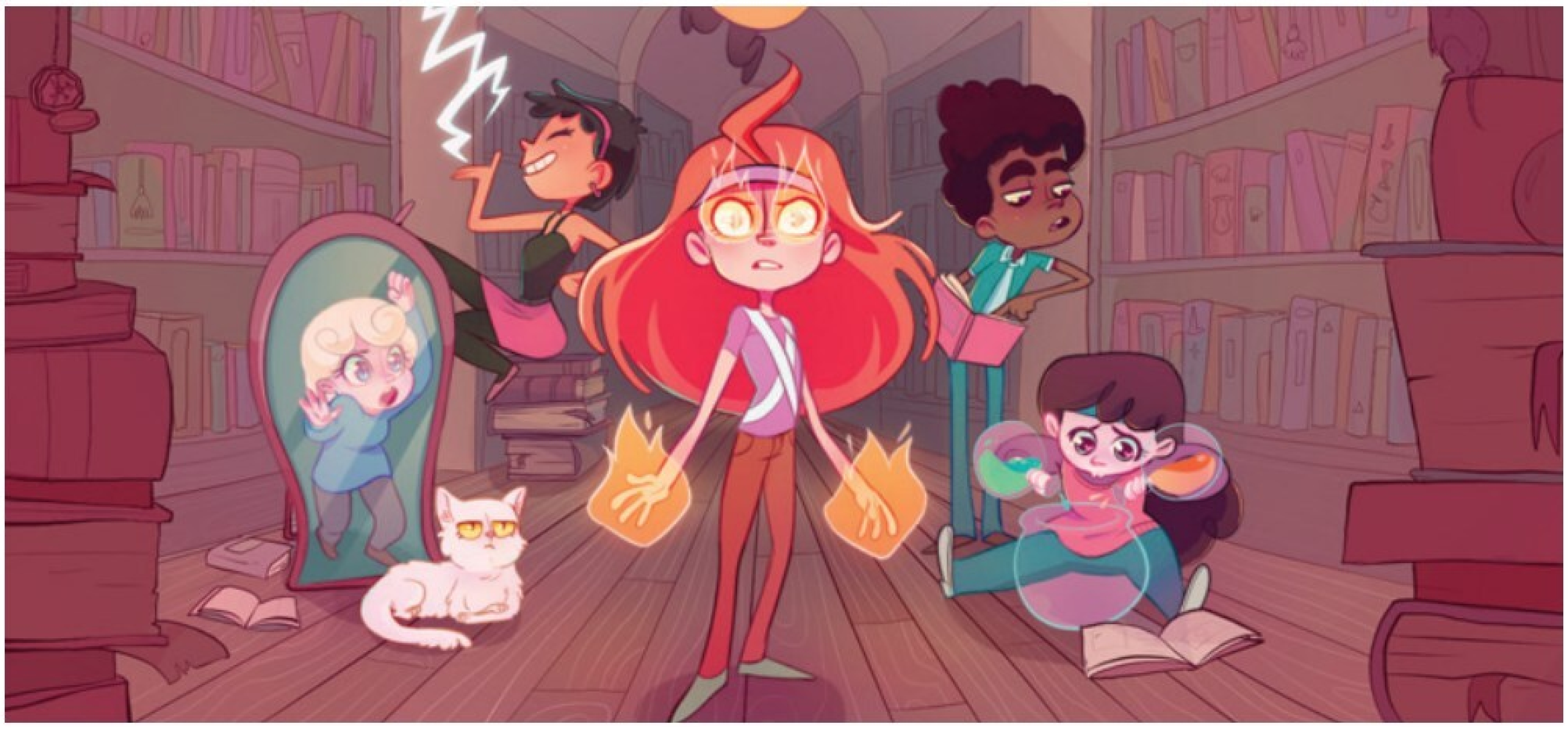
Entire buildings collapse in the fray and bridges break apart as agents run across them, trying to outrun the destruction. Assorted abilities, like shields and additional jetpack boosts, were teased, as well. We also see an agent doing a power drop, breaking through multiple levels of a building as they fly downward.

Since Crackdown 3 was first revealed, its destructibility has been its main selling point. Early in the marketing pitch for the Xbox One hardware, Crackdown 3 was a tentpole for its cloud computing abilities. Microsoft claimed the console's online computing capabilities were important to the city's potential to be torn apart. In the four years since Crackdown 3's announcement, this look at Wrecking Zone has arguably been the truest realization of that promise. Every element of the Wrecking Zone city (which is presumably smaller than the city in the single-player campaign) looks like it can break, dramatically changing the layout of the level. Given enough time, it looks like 10 agents could truly level the entire city and turn the arena into a flat battleground.

Crackdown 3 has been a long time coming, and it has a lot of ground to make up in terms of competing in the open-world video game market. We don't expect it to be a fully realized simulation of a future city, but it needs to function as a fun playground worth exploring. We're excited to find out if it's worth joining up with the agency again in February. » **Kyle Hilliard**

Ikenfell

The right timing for RPG magic



As more RPGs modernize to try and keep up with the times, there's something to be said about a simpler setup. Nostalgia is at a high for games with a feel akin to the genre's classic days à la Chrono Trigger and Phantasy Star. We've seen many games try to bring back these experiences, from I am Setsuna to Cosmic Star Heroine, but few have truly recaptured the magic. If you're a fan of turn-based battle systems and charming tales, the upcoming indie RPG Ikenfell is worth keeping on your radar. It has all of the ingredients of classic RPG design, while placing you in an amusing world of students attending a magic academy.

The game follows a group of troublemakers who become suspicious when a famous student suddenly disappears. This puts them on a quest to uncover the dark secrets about their academy. During your journey, you explore the school, including the dorms, alchemy labs, and some mysterious and magical locations.

To experience this adventure firsthand, I played a recent demo that started about eight hours into the game. It transports me to the Snatcher's Lair, putting me in the pursuit of a magical cloak. The Snatcher is a big pink blob, who stole the cloak because it matches his hat. Right out of the gate, Ikenfell has an Earthbound-like feel with lighthearted dialogue, bizarre interactions with magical beings, and doing silly things like petting cats to save and restore health. To finally pin the Snatcher down, I must search his underground lair and complete light puzzles like walking on switches in a specific order to gain access to new areas. Along the way, baddies attack, from small rock-like enemies that roll into me, and jeans (yes, pants are evil) that kick me across the battle screen.

Ikenfell's bread and butter is its turn-based battle system reminiscent of the Mario & Luigi RPGs. You time your button presses to animations, and timely hits boost your attacks and improve your defense. The turn order is displayed at the top of the screen so you can make your moves wisely, and there's an array of spells and cool abilities across my three-member party. For instance, I have the ability to levitate my opponents, getting them out of my vicinity and then maximizing my attack power by timing my button press right as they hit the floor.

Similar to a strategy/RPG like Fire Emblem, each character has a movement radius alongside where their attacks and spells can go. Some characters are long casters, while with others you'll need to get up close to pack a punch. The simple system had more strategy than I expected, as some enemies can self-destruct and you can take damage by getting knocked into your party members. As a plus, you can also knock enemies into each other with some of your attacks for additional damage.

All this leads to a big battle with the Snatcher, who summons jeans and boots as allies. To defeat him I must combine the best of my party members' abilities. My fireball attack hits multiple enemies to take care of the extra foes, I poison Snatcher so he takes additional damage every turn, and focus a character on healing, taking into consideration it's on a two-turn cooldown. Lastly, I levitate Snatcher every chance I get to badly damage him and get my party out of harm's way.

So far, Ikenfell seems like it has a solid battle system on its hands with plenty of creativity flowing through it. I'll be interested in getting to know the different characters and seeing where this crazy journey leads.
» **Kimberley Wallace**

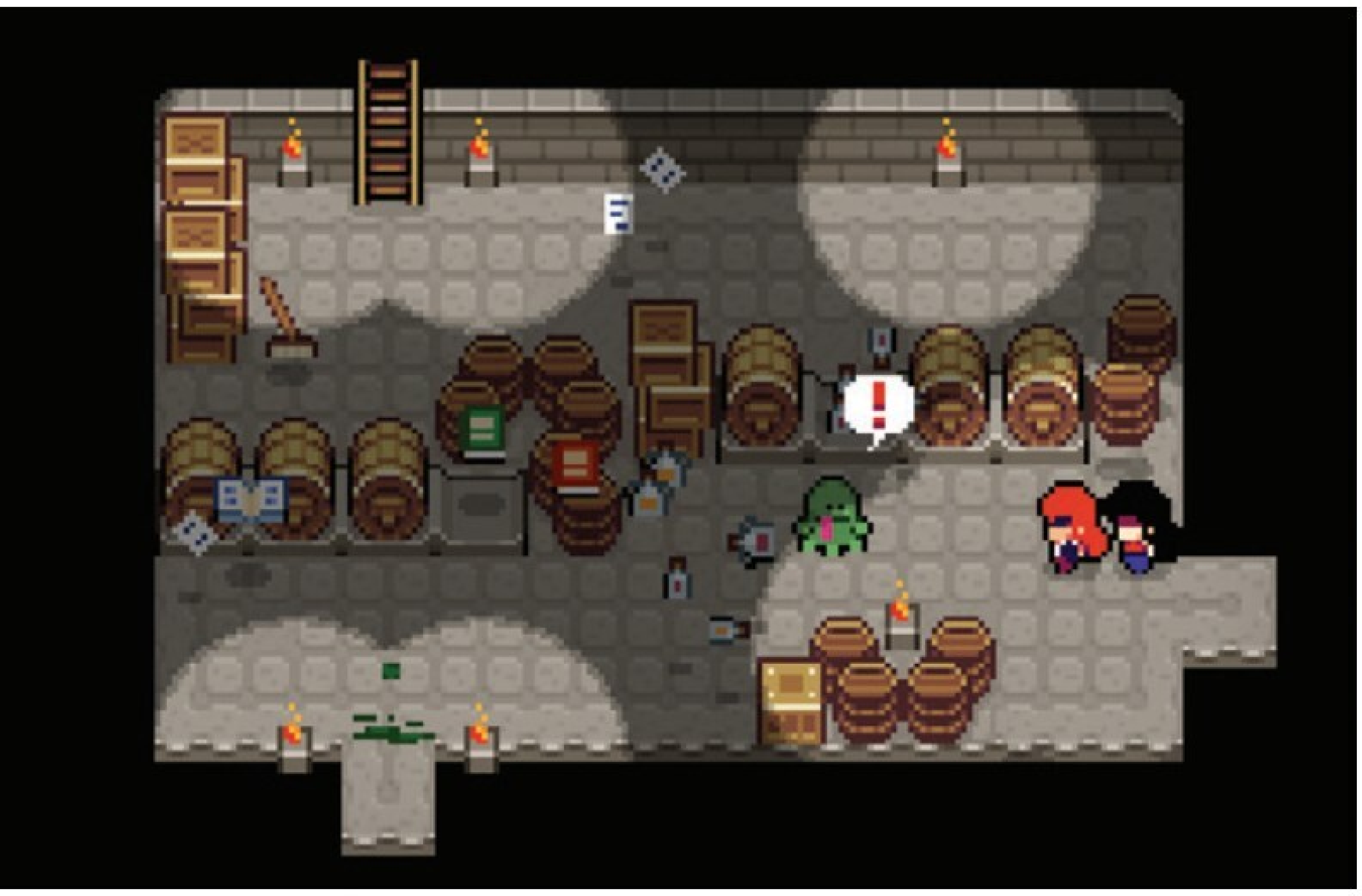
» **Platform**
PC • Mac

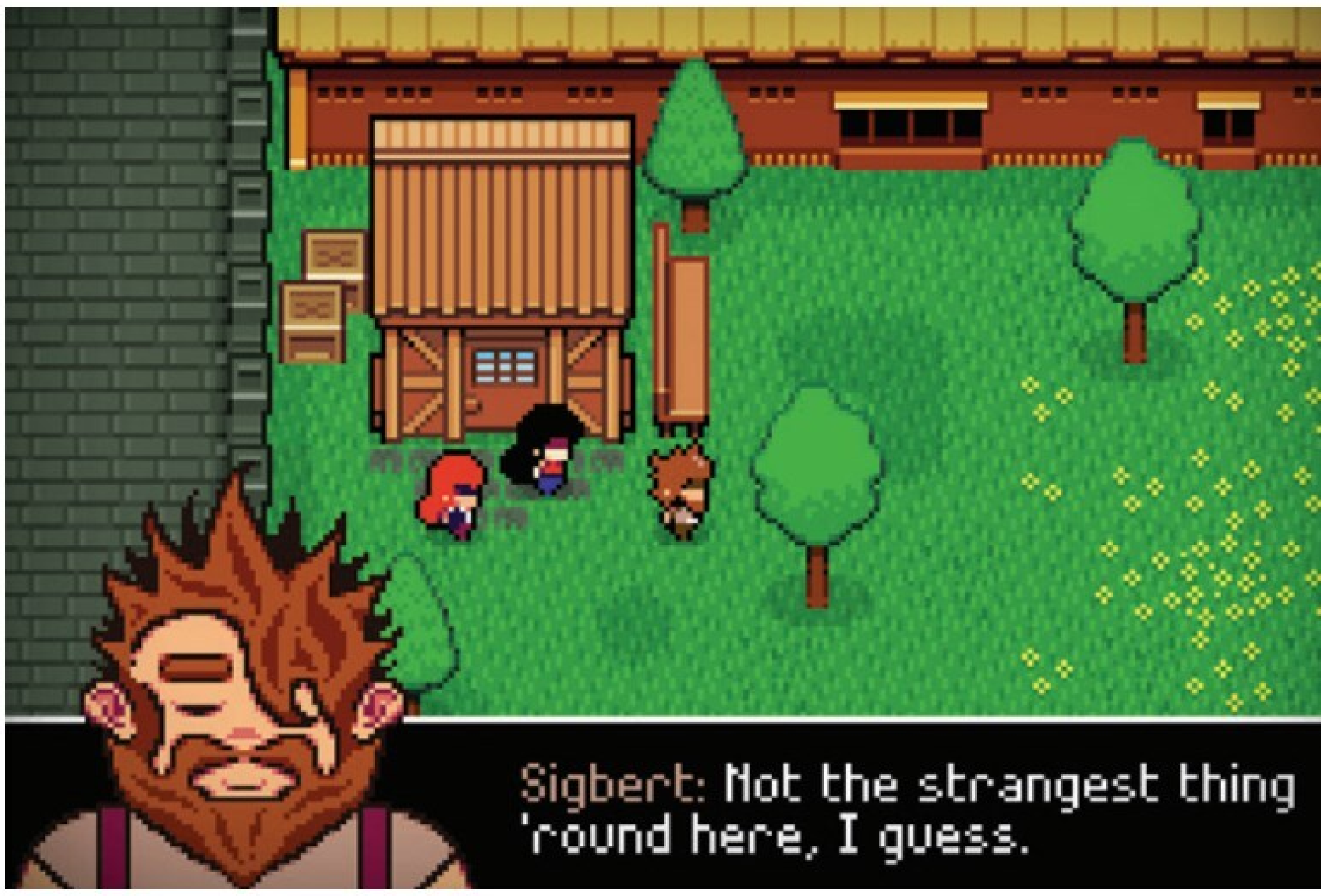
» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Humble Bundle

» **Developer**
Happy Ray Games

» **Release**
2019





Sigbert: Not the strangest thing 'round here, I guess.

Catherine: Full Body

Throwing a fourth wheel into a love triangle

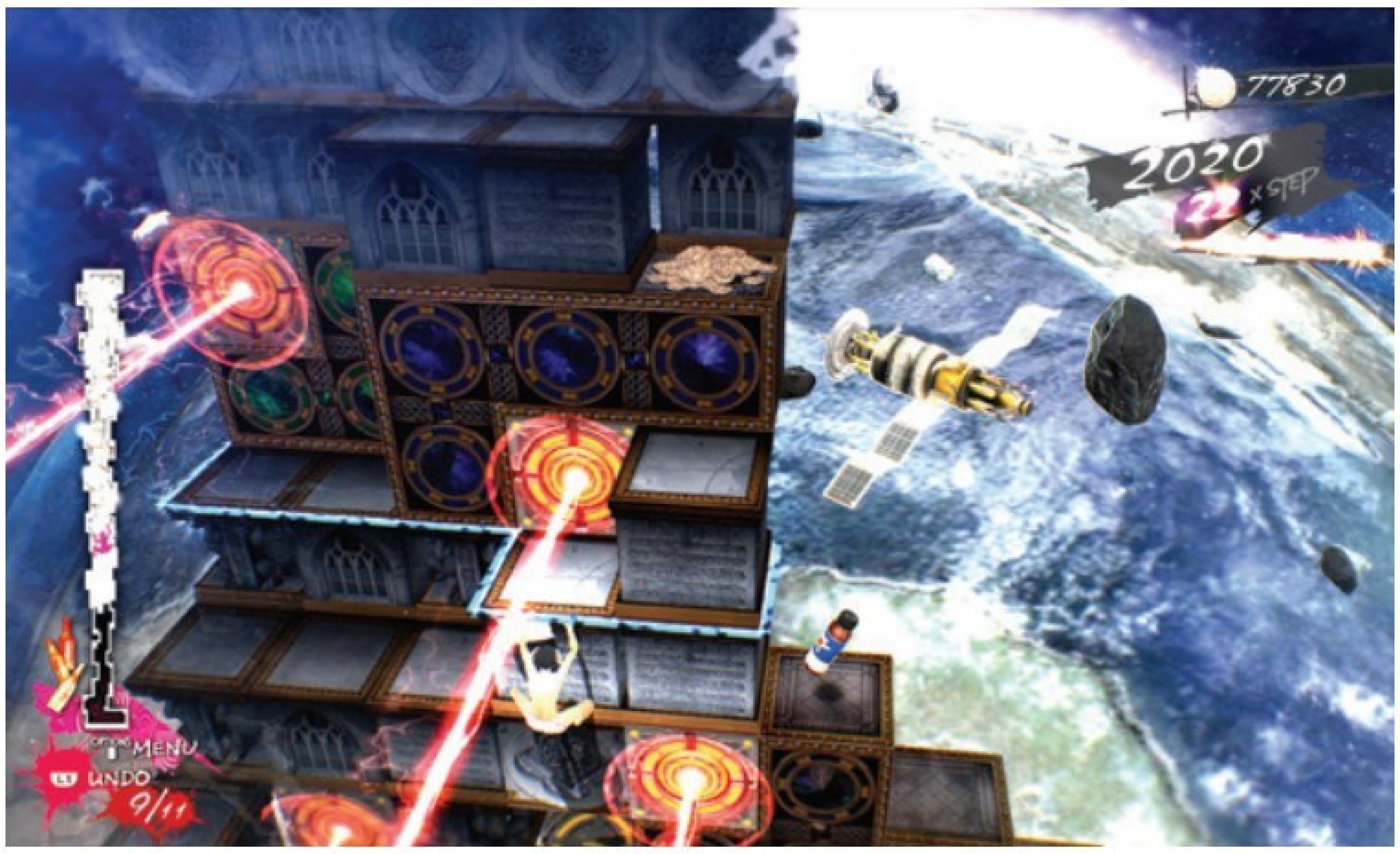
» **Platform**
PS4

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player
Puzzle/Adventure
(2-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Atlus

» **Developer**
Studio Zero

» **Release**
2019



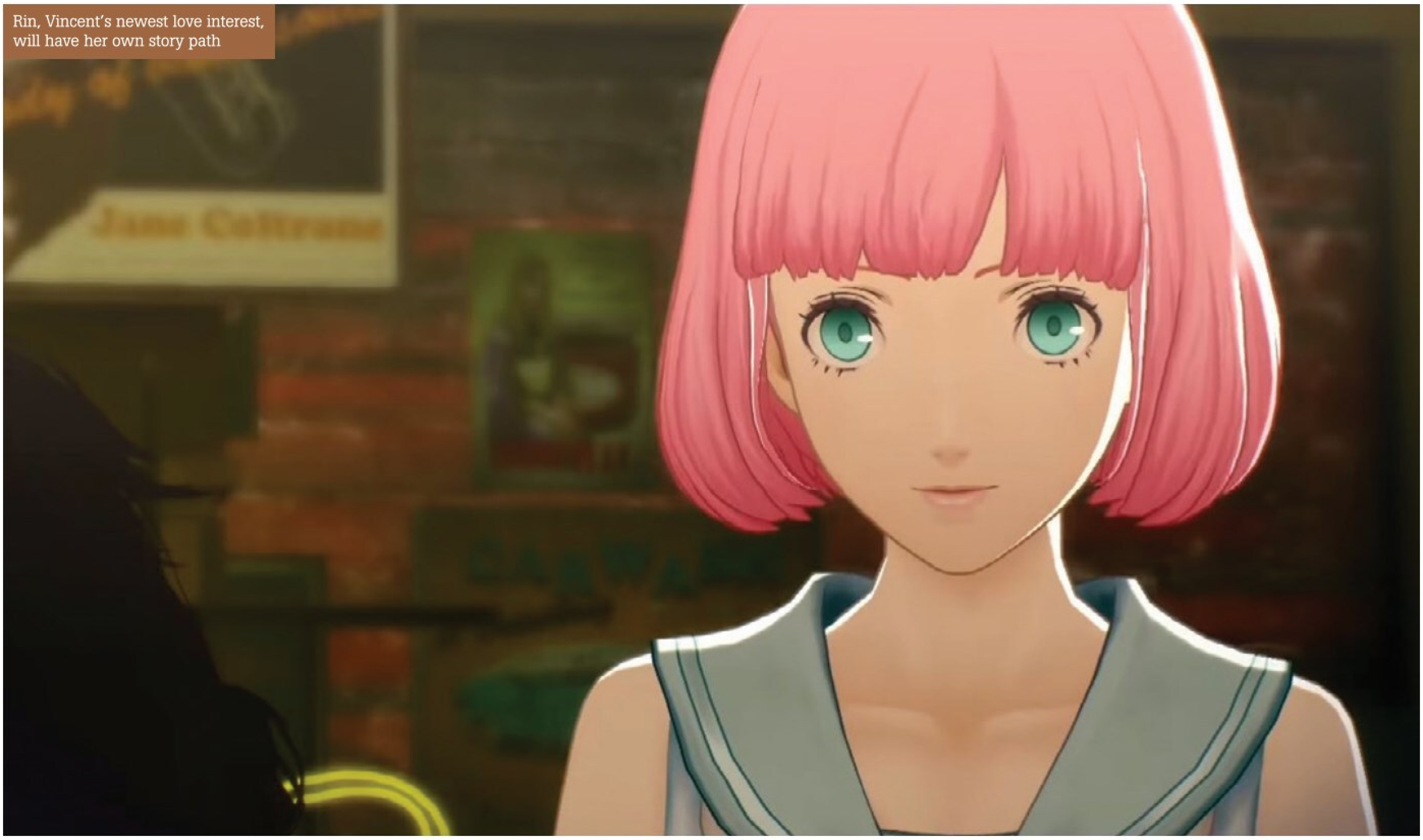
In 2011, the team behind the Persona series took a bit of a detour with Catherine, a puzzle-platformer featuring a heavy dose of visual-novel storytelling. It explores the topics of morality and relationships, as protagonist Vincent gets involved in a love triangle with two polar opposites, Catherine and Katherine. The adventure also taps into the minds of its players by having them think about their own morality and preferences, polling them on how they'd approach hypothetical scenario, like having a partner cheat on them.

With its upcoming PS4 re-release, Catherine: Full Body, publisher Atlus is making some changes to the original game's features and story. The biggest twist is the introduction of a new love interest, Rin (short for Qatherine). She's a quiet, reserved amnesiac who plays the piano at the Stray Sheep bar. She acts as a potential third branch for the story to take, and will be a major part of the main story in Full Body. While Catherine represented freedom and Katherine commitment, Rin looks to represent acceptance, as her conversations in a recent trailer revolve around loving someone for who they are.

If you still fancy yourself a bigger fan of Catherine or Katherine, Full Body also has a number of new conversations, events, and cutscenes for them as well. There are also new patrons to talk to at the Stray Sheep, stages, and endings to explore.

Developer Studio Zero is also making some changes to the gameplay. For those who didn't enjoy the block-pushing parts of the game, a new difficulty mode lets you skip these stages altogether and just enjoy the story instead. As a nod to the original game's small-but-fierce competitive scene, the colosseum and battle modes from the original release will now have online functionality. Atlus also announced that Persona 5's Joker will make an appearance in these modes as a playable character, though he won't be involved in the main story.

Catherine was a curious but divisive oddity when it first released; fans took to its mature story but weren't always captivated by its gameplay. With Full Body, Atlus looks to be fleshing out the game for both kinds of fans, beefing up the narrative and gameplay before fans revisit it in 2019.
» **Suriel Vazquez**


Rin, Vincent's newest love interest, will have her own story path

Dirt Rally 2.0

No cutting allowed

Dirt Rally's 2015 debut felt like a tentative first step in the series, a curious statement given developer Codemasters extensive racing expertise and storied history in video game rally racing via the old Colin McRae series. The title built up its content slowly through Early Access, didn't launch simultaneously on all platforms, and the company said it was taking a wait-and-see approach as to the series' future. At the time Codemasters had been packaging rally racing under the general off-road Dirt franchise, but the superb quality of Dirt Rally and fans' thirst for a game solely devoted to rally racing proved it wasn't wrong. Taking heed, Dirt Rally 2.0 is giving fans more of what they want – specifically the challenge only a rally driver would crave.

"It's a hardcore game that's difficult to play – that's the way we want it to be," says Jon Armstrong, real-life rally driver, esports rally champion, and consultant. "We took a nuts-and-bolts approach to it. We stripped it all back and really focused on the physics models, how the tires interact with the surfaces, the differentials, and everything's been improved."

Armstrong mentions how he thinks the gravel, in particular, is something fans will notice has improved from the first title, specifically the way it spins the wheels in a rear-wheel drive car and how it feels to push the tires through the gravel. Keeping up with track conditions is an important part of Dirt Rally 2.0's gameplay, since surfaces degrade and tire wear has been added.

If you're one of the first to tackle a stage in one of the game's six new locations (New Zealand, Argentina, Spain, Poland, Australia, and the U.S.) tracks feel more slippery due to the loose gravel. On the other hand, if you start towards the back of the pack, the track will have developed ruts, is more bumpy, and you may go off the track entirely if you leave the racing line. The ideal place is in the middle – spots five through ten.

Despite the advances in the career modes of fellow Codemasters racing games F1 2018 and Dirt 4, Dirt Rally 2.0's career mode is similar to its predecessor, although the developer is promising more randomness in each season's schedule. Earnings are put towards expanding your garage, upgrading parts, and hiring engineers in a fixed order you can train to increase your knowledge in the different car types (FF, RR, 4WD, etc.) and to decrease repair time. Driving research miles helps your engineers to identify potential performance gains. It's then up to you to decide what to buy and any potential trade-offs. Do you remap your engine and run a rich fuel mixture, giving you performance at the expense of durability?

There could have been benefits from Dirt Rally 2.0 adopting certain elements of previous Codemasters' titles like F1 2018's R&D model, rewinds, or the random stage-maker of Dirt 4. However, that would be drifting away from what made the first game so great – its concentration on rally racing, pure and simple.

» **Matthew Kato**

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Racing
(8-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Deep Silver

» **Developer**
Codemasters

» **Release**
February 26

The historic championship starts out with slower, bouncier '60s and '70s cars before letting you pick from a wider selection ranging in power, grip, braking, and handling

Visage

Unsettling, atmospheric horror

» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
SadSquare Studio

» Developer
SadSquare Studio

» Release
TBA

Games like Amnesia: The Dark Descent and P.T. have inspired a new wave of vulnerability-centric horror games in which players are often completely defenseless, left to the whims of whatever supernatural terrors they encounter. Visage taps into first-person haunted house exploration in a big way, as the player searches room after room, unveiling terrible clues that reveal the fates of previous inhabitants. In the current early access build, players unravel the mystery of Lucy, a horrifying yarn of medication and dark companions. While it's just a slice of the larger tale, it's a big enough piece to inspire confidence in anyone looking for a genuinely scary and atmospheric trek.

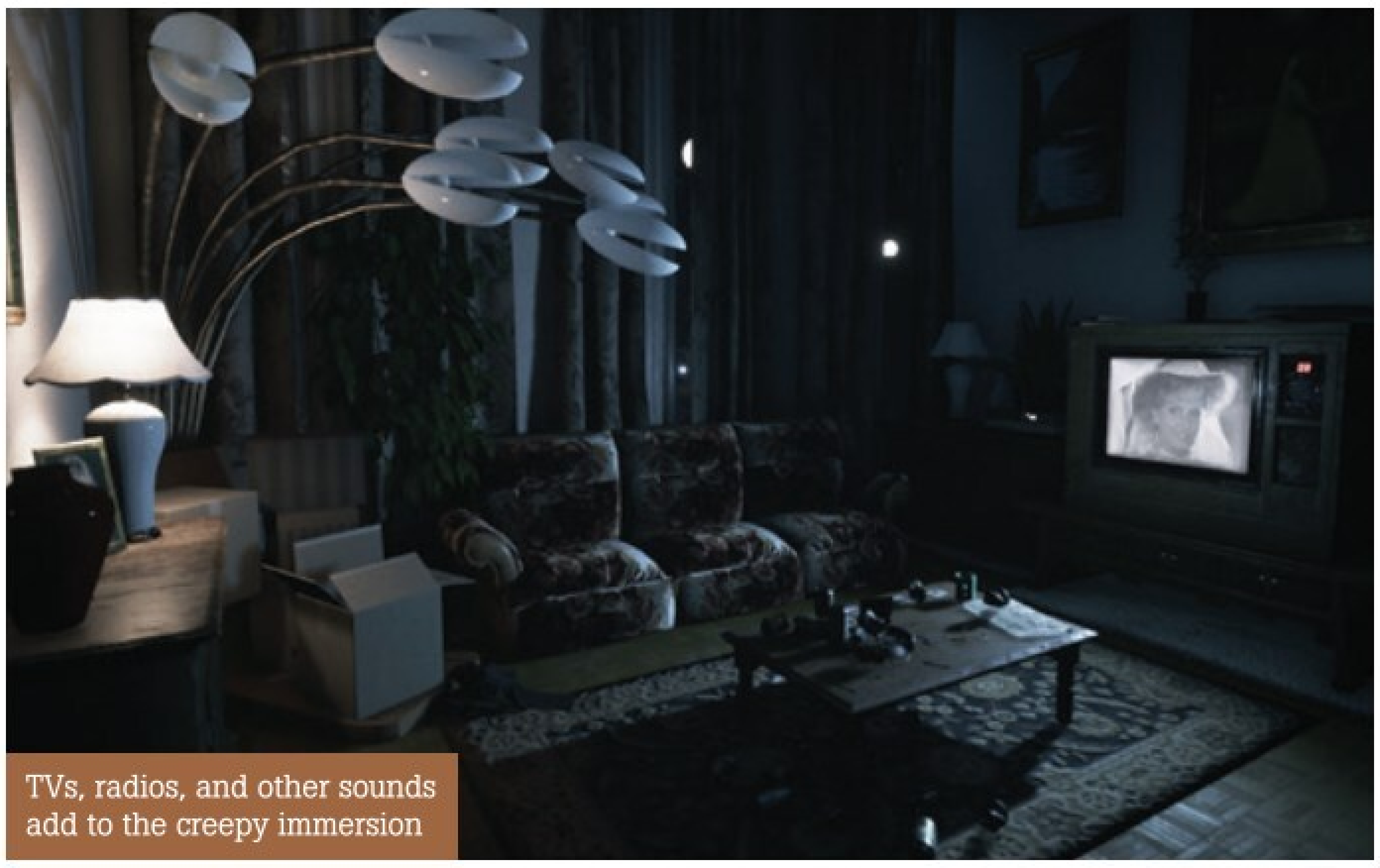
As the player spends time in the dark, sanity wanes. Candles, lighters, and pills all offer ways to see and offer solace against insanity (which can cause supernatural effects in the environment, including lethal visits from various spirits and creatures), but supplies are limited, forcing players to make uncomfortable choices often. Key items like the camera are often integral to a story, but have mechanical considerations as well; when your light wanes, often all you have to see ahead is the flash of the camera, revealing hidden things on walls, what's in front of you, and other mysteries.

Visage has its share of jump scares, but they are used sparingly. In most cases, the ever-changing supernatural whims of the house and the grim tale create an oppressive, claustrophobic atmosphere that sets you up perfectly for well-timed terror. Puzzles abound, but none are too complex to solve. Instead, they function as furtive mind-teasers that stress you for time and sanity as you wander the dark halls and stairways.

The full game is set to take you through the terrible tale of an entire family that fell to the house's machinations, but the first story we have of Lucy is suitably horrifying on its own. At the end of each character's chapter, the player gets a story vignette to tie together the story threads – just in case they haven't been able to do it themselves – and unlocks some aspects of a persistent progression room. There are inevitably more secrets to unravel through hidden items and areas as players delve deeper into the reaches of the house and the minds of the fallen family members. Right now, the early access segment ends with a hilarious Silent Hill-inspired Easter egg for those who continue playing after Lucy's tale has come to its dire conclusion.

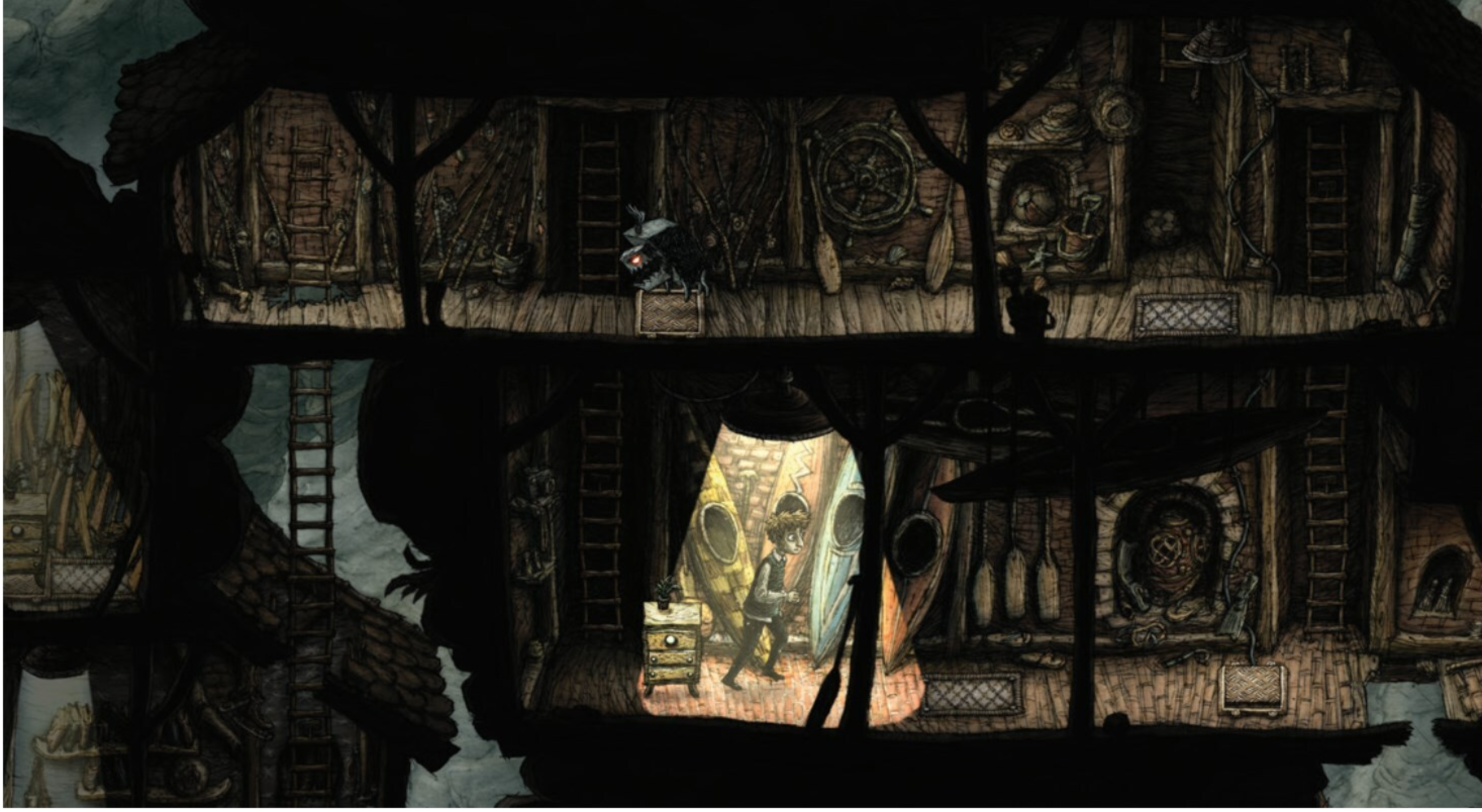
Visage is set to launch as a smart, scary horror game, expected to move into full release next year.

» **Daniel Tack**



TVs, radios, and other sounds add to the creepy immersion

The house can change in moments, pushing the borders of reality



Creaks

Mapping out the basement

Best known for point-and-click adventure games like Machinarium and Botanicula, Amanita Design is veering from that formula with its latest title. Combining hand-drawn art with an overabundance of ambient sounds, Creaks brings Amanita Design's trademark expertise and building atmosphere into a puzzle-platformer.

Creaks puts players in control of a man who discovers a secret compartment behind a wall in his house, leading to a labyrinthian castle descending into the earth below. Peeling away some dangling wallpaper leads to a hidden elevator, exposing several types of zones further down. The first zone most closely resembles a home in disrepair, but the otherworld quality becomes more prominent as the player descends floors.

While the focus is on puzzles, Creaks brings danger to Amanita Design's games in a way previous titles did not. For the first time, characters can die if they get a little too close to enemies, making players feel more cautious about their surroundings. Death is not exceedingly punitive, usually only sending players back to the beginning of a room, but it gives a sense of tension to puzzle-solving.

The first enemies the character runs into are mechanical dogs, which have the odd quirk of turning into nightstands when touched by light. The puzzles around the dogs tend to focus on finding ways to turn and keep them turned into nightstands to reach otherwise inaccessible areas. The second zone features a wandering Jellyfish that has no aggressive tendencies, but will kill you all the same if you accidentally touch it. Puzzles involve manipulating its movement with light switches to get you safely out of the way of its deadly touch.

Sound is important to the way players overcome the obstacles, but also provides atmosphere beyond what you would expect from a 2D puzzle game. Every bark from an enemy dog, skittering of a spider across a wooden plank, and creak in the floor reminds you that the familiar settings of the house can feel altogether alien when twisting just enough of it. When the game does choose to make big sounds, like a giant arm swaying outside the room just out of view, the impact seems all the heavier for it.

Creaks is a new step for Amanita Design into well-trodden territory for other developers, but taking the experience, personality, and polish from games like Machinarium and Chuchel is serving Creaks well so far. You can explore the mysteries of the basement for yourself in 2019. » **Imran Khan**

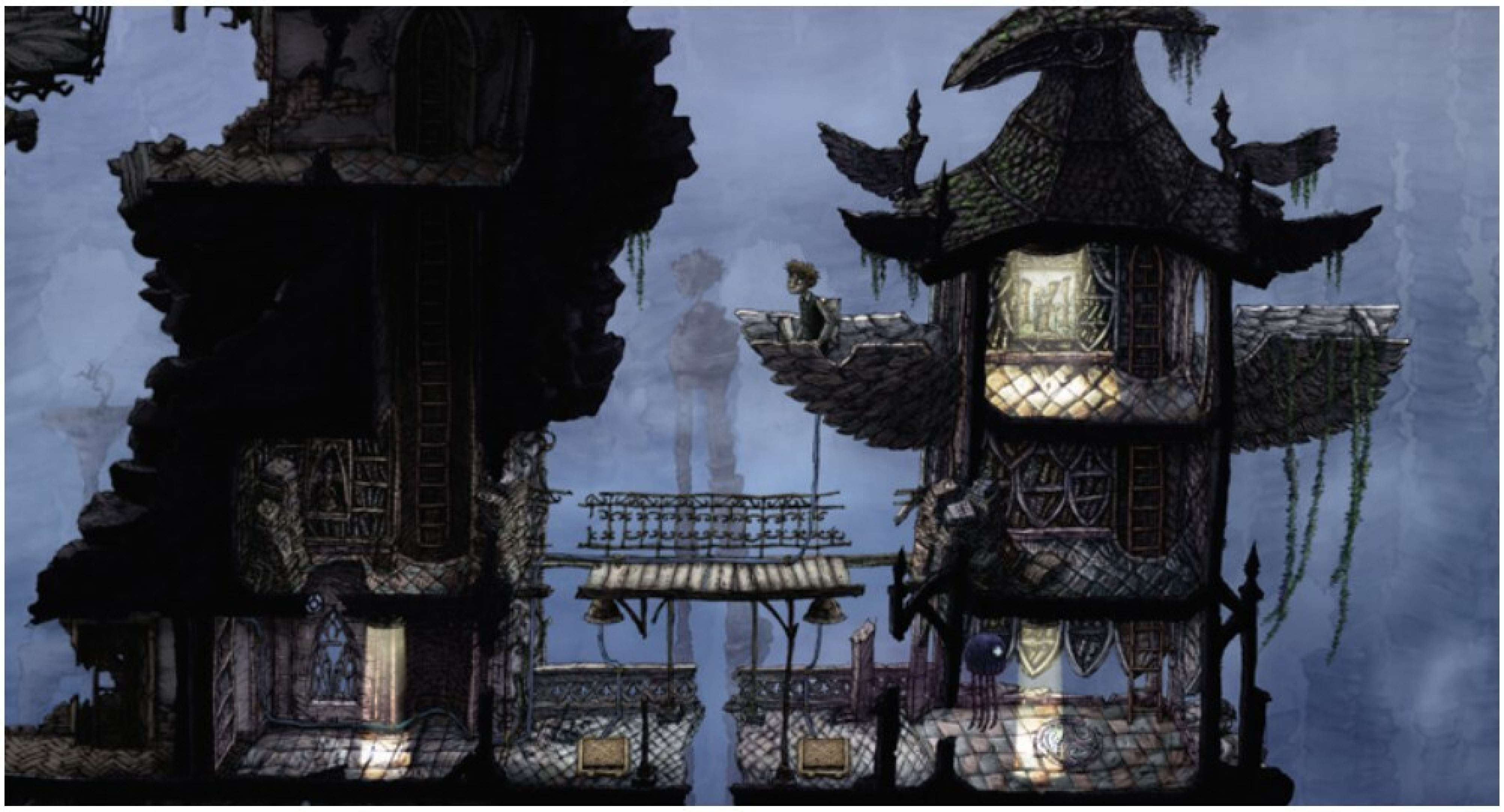
» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

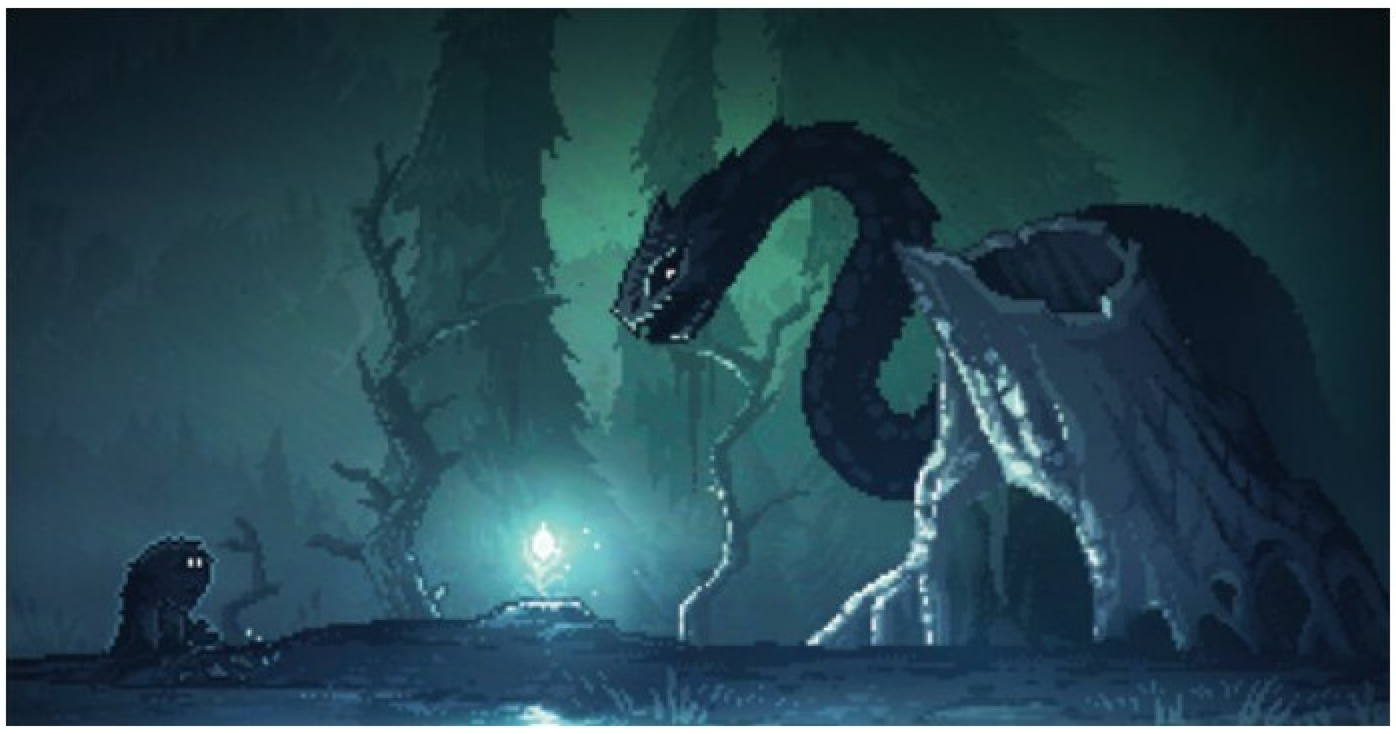
» **Style**
1-Player Adventure

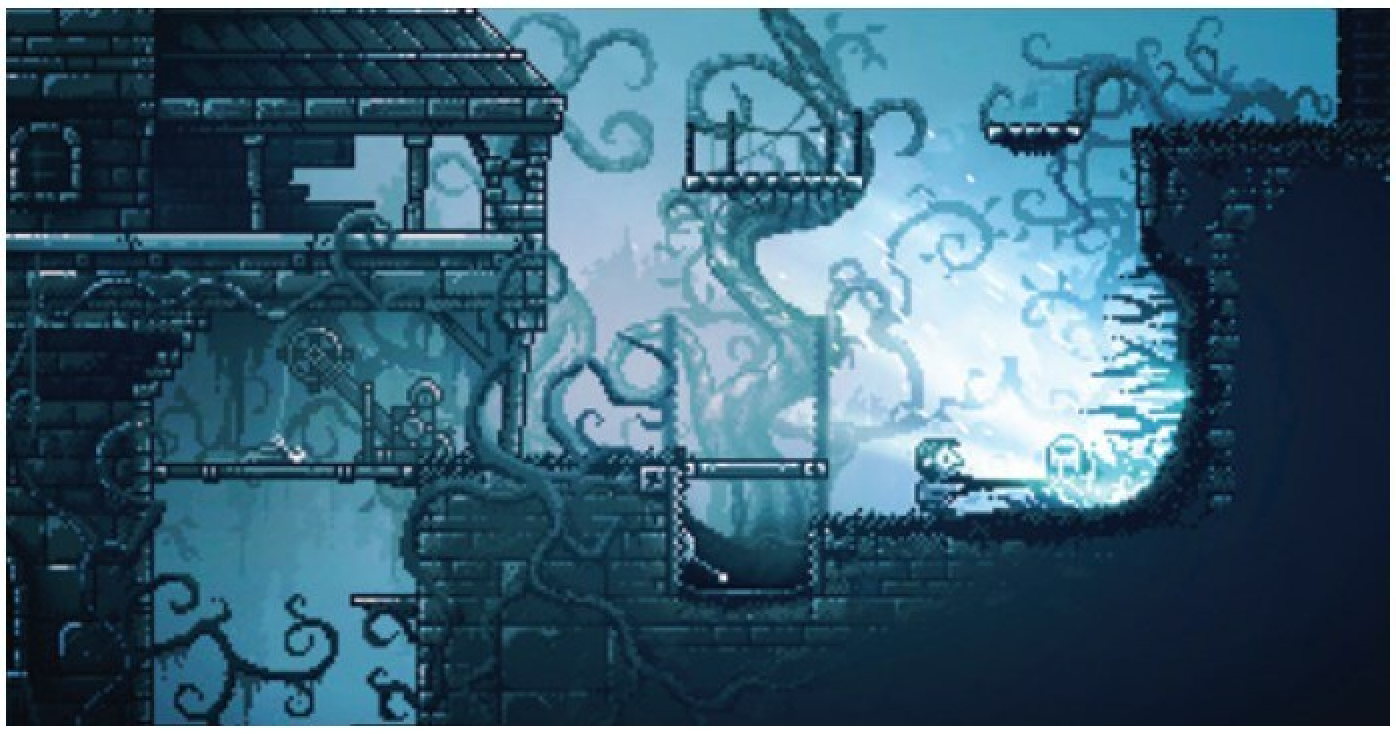
» **Publisher**
Amanita Design

» **Developer**
Amanita Design

» **Release**
2019







Inmost

Platforming and puzzle-solving in a haunting world

» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Chucklefish Games

» Developer
Hidden Layer Games

» Release
2019

Standing out in the sea of indie platformers is no easy feat, but every now and then a talented developer with some fresh ideas rises to the occasion. Hidden Layer Games is a new studio comprised of just two employees: Ukrainian-born programmer Andriy Vinchkovskiy, and Russian artist and game designer Alexey Testov. Together they are creating Inmost, an upcoming Metroid-style platformer that grabs the player's eye with an evocative color palette and fluid pixel-art animation. As our hands-on demo revealed, Inmost's visuals aren't the only reason indie fans should take notice.

While you might not guess from the visuals, Inmost is primarily a story-driven game – and a personal one at that. "It's not a story about saving the world," Testov tells us. "Instead Inmost is a story about everyday people and their decisions – about mistakes and consequences, which can destroy the world around them like a house of cards."

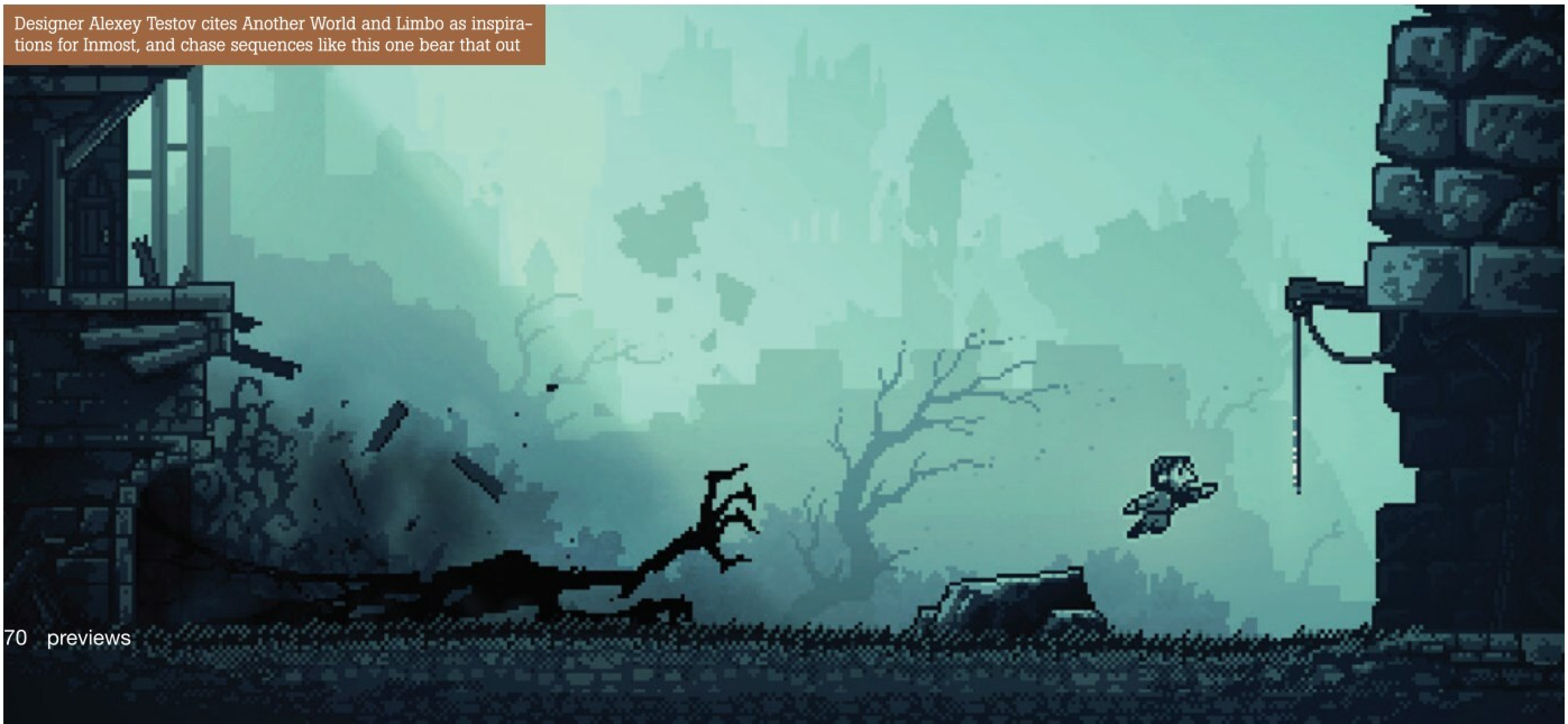
Our demo begins with a little girl looking for a way out of a locked house. Unlike most platformers, her movement is slow and her jump is a tyke-sized hop that's virtually useless. Instead, we must find a stool and drag it over to a nearby table in order to climb up to an out-of-reach vent. As she enters the passageway, a flash of lightning illuminates two ghostly silhouettes on the wall, a foreboding vision of what's to come.

Minutes later, the demo shifts to an old man sitting on a bench outside of a dilapidated castle. Inmost features three main protagonists, each with their own story. This man is the second character, and compared to the little girl, he moves faster, jumps farther, and can perform a life-saving roll that comes in handy soon enough. The final character, a cursed knight, was not present in our demo, but Testov says the three narratives intertwine and affect one another's disparate worlds, as will others. "There's a lot of additional characters and NPCs with their own stories, which also influence the main story – some of them may even be playable!"

The rest of the demo focuses on the man navigating the castle, and is more about solving environmental puzzles than performing rigorous platforming sequences. Testov cites Another World, Limbo, and To The Moon as inspirations, which is apparent in the gameplay – progressing requires paying close attention to surroundings and dodging deadly shadow monsters that kill on contact. But Hidden Layer isn't aiming to make another tough-as-nails platformer. "We don't want to make the game *too* difficult; it's more important for us to tell an intriguing story. The game has some quite intense moments, but their main purpose is to … highlight something cool rather than to create real obstacles for the player." Players respawn in the same general location when they die, so you won't have to replay more than a few seconds of gameplay to get back up to speed.

Inmost's haunting narrative and environmental puzzles made as much of an impression on us as its art style, and we look forward to unraveling more of its mysteries next year. Inmost is currently slated for PC only, but Testov says a console release is "definitely interesting," and they are looking into it. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

Designer Alexey Testov cites Another World and Limbo as inspirations for Inmost, and chase sequences like this one bear that out



Team Sonic Racing

Fist bumping on the race track

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1 to 4-Player Racing
(12-Player Online)

» Publisher
Sega

» Developer
Sumo Digital,
Sonic Team

» Release
May 21

Speed has long been Sonic the Hedgehog's defining characteristic, making racing a natural fit. The two have come together in myriad ways, ranging from the on-foot racing game Sonic R on Saturn to the Blue Blur's earliest racing spin-off, the Sonic Drift series on Game Gear. Most recently, the crossover Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing games featured characters across Sega's multiple franchises. Now, the team behind that well-liked series is bringing the focus back to just Sonic and his stable of friends and enemies (sorry Shenmue and Monkey Ball fans) as they hop in karts to race around 21 tracks both familiar and new.

With the emphasis on just Sonic characters, the roster includes fan-favorites such as mainstays like Sonic and Shadow, to slightly deeper cuts like Big the Cat and Vector. We currently know 12 of the 15 characters (see sidebar), but with notable characters like Dr. Eggman and Metal Sonic not on the list, we can probably safely assume they'll appear alongside another baddie.

The characters are split into teams of three based on their alliances, and every character fits into one of three classes: speed, technique, or power. While traditional teams stay within those defined alliances and feature one character from each class, you can mix and match between teams and build your team composition however you choose.

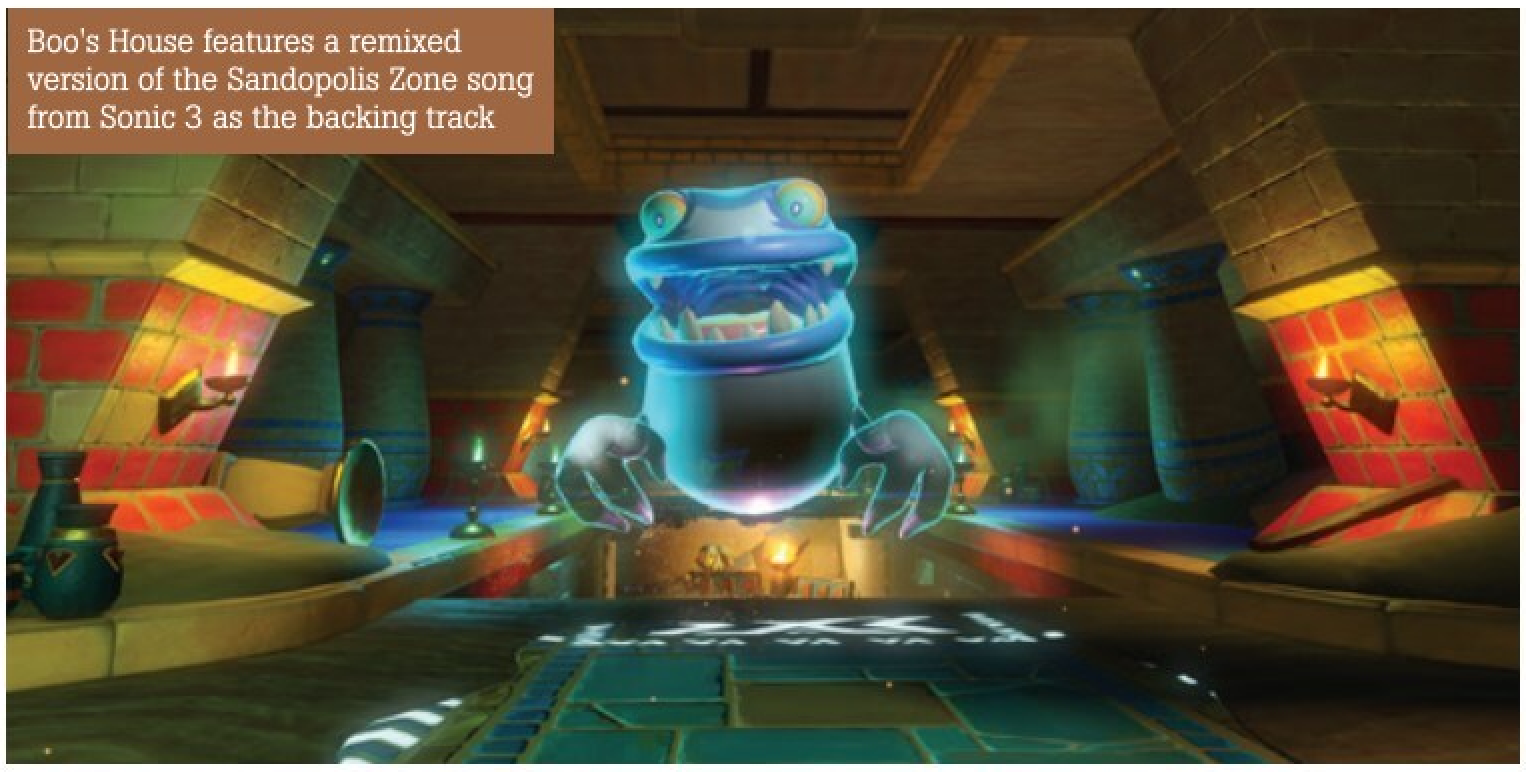
Once a race begins, it plays out like a standard kart racer. Characters drift around corners, acquire power-ups and items, and dodge obstacles in the push to be first. In addition to the familiar formula, you can help your teammates by gifting items or letting them slingshot around you.

At the end of the race, it's not about how you did, but rather how your team did. Points are assigned based on each individual finishing spot. This means if your teammates land near the bottom, the team finishing more consistently near the top could edge you out. I like how the team-based twist requires you to work together to all do well, giving meaning to gifting and drafting mechanics.

According to producer Takashi Iizuka, characters also have situational conversations during races, adding an extra touch for fans of the series. "We created a lot of dialogue for all the characters for when you receive an item from a teammate, spin out a rival opponent, or when you are calling out for help to your teammates," he says. "We wanted the players to really feel like they were racing in the Sonic universe alongside all of the characters."

In addition to the team-based races, players can also compete in solo races divorced from the team concept alongside a mission-based Team Adventure story mode.

Last month, Team Sonic Racing slipped from its December 2018 release window to May 2019 to improve on the game balance, online play, and fine tune the experience as a whole. Iizuka hopes these improvements will give Team Sonic Racing a long shelf life once it launches. We'll find out for sure when the game comes out in May. **» Brian Shea**



Boo's House features a remixed version of the Sandopolis Zone song from Sonic 3 as the backing track

The Roster

Team Sonic Racing will feature 15 playable characters when it launches in May. We currently know 12 of the 15 that will get behind the wheel in this Sega racer.

Team Sonic
- Sonic
- Tails
- Knuckles

Team Dark
- Shadow
- Rouge
- E-123 Omega

Team Rose
- Amy
- Big
- Chao

Team Vector
- Blaze
- Silver
- Vector

Afterparty

A road trip down south

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**
Night School Studio

» **Developer**
Night School Studio

» **Release**
2019

When Night School Studio released mystery romp Oxenfree in 2016, fans and critics alike were taken back by the inventive narrative and surprisingly natural dialogue between the teen protagonists. With Afterparty, Night School is going back to a similar well with two college best friends who find themselves both dead and damned, landing headfirst in the pits of Hell with zero understanding of how they got there.

Milo and Lola are aghast to discover their eternal torment is already underway thanks to their tour guide, a "personal demon" by the name of Samantha. After begging and pleading to be sent back home, the pair convince Samantha to at least talk to some friends and see what she can do. With the business of Hell shutting down after sunset, its demons retire to bars and nightclubs to take the edge off a long day of torturing humans. Samantha brings her wards to a demon dive bar so she can get some information to a friend, leaving Milo and Lola to fend for themselves while they figure out why they're down below.

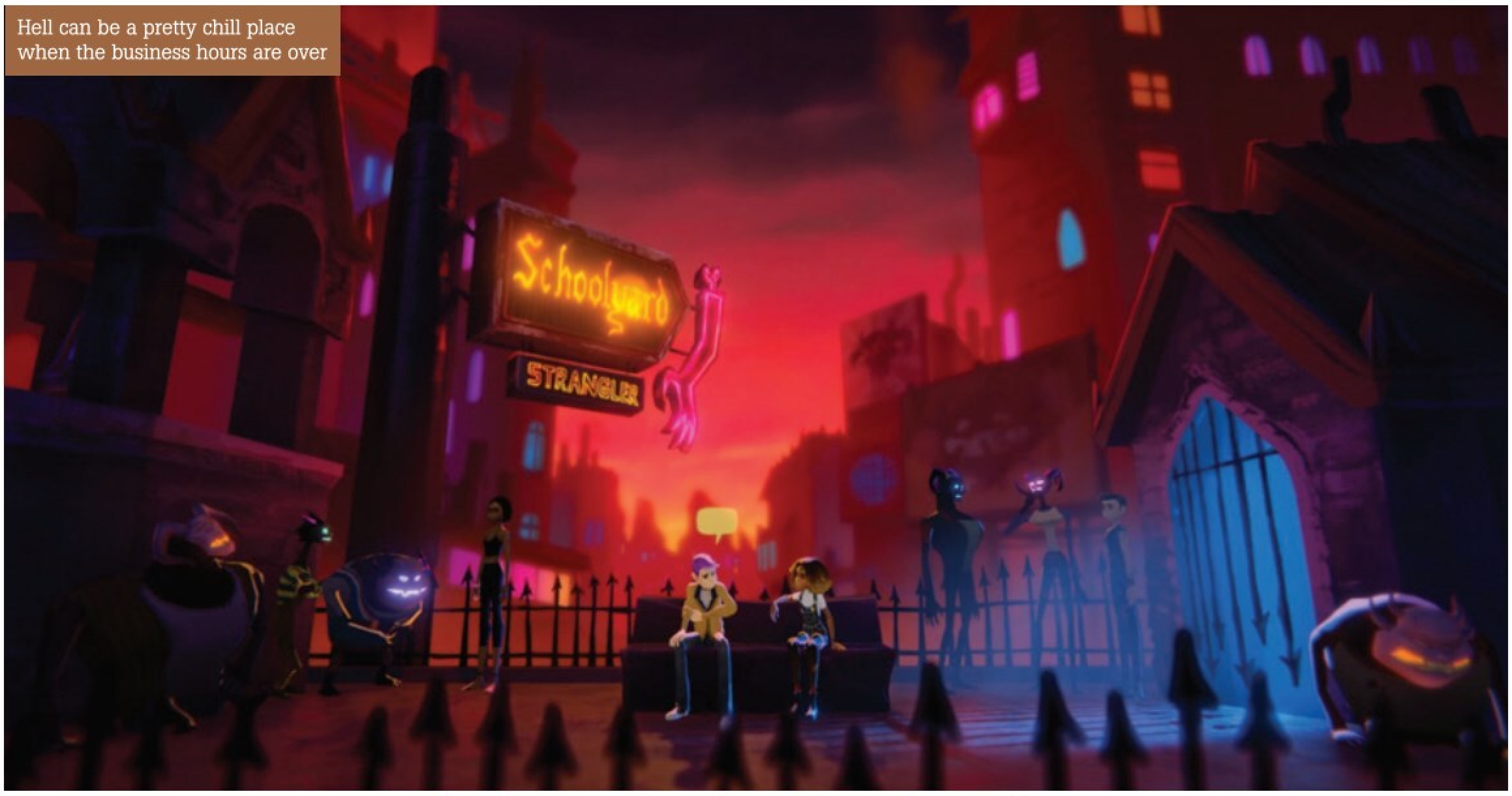
The adventure puts players in control of both Sam and Lola, making decisions and dialogue choices as the situation demands. The two act as a pair, which means you're often using one character to cajole and convince the other, or playing both sides of an argument. It reinforces that the two of them are in this mess together, even in a room surrounded by demons.

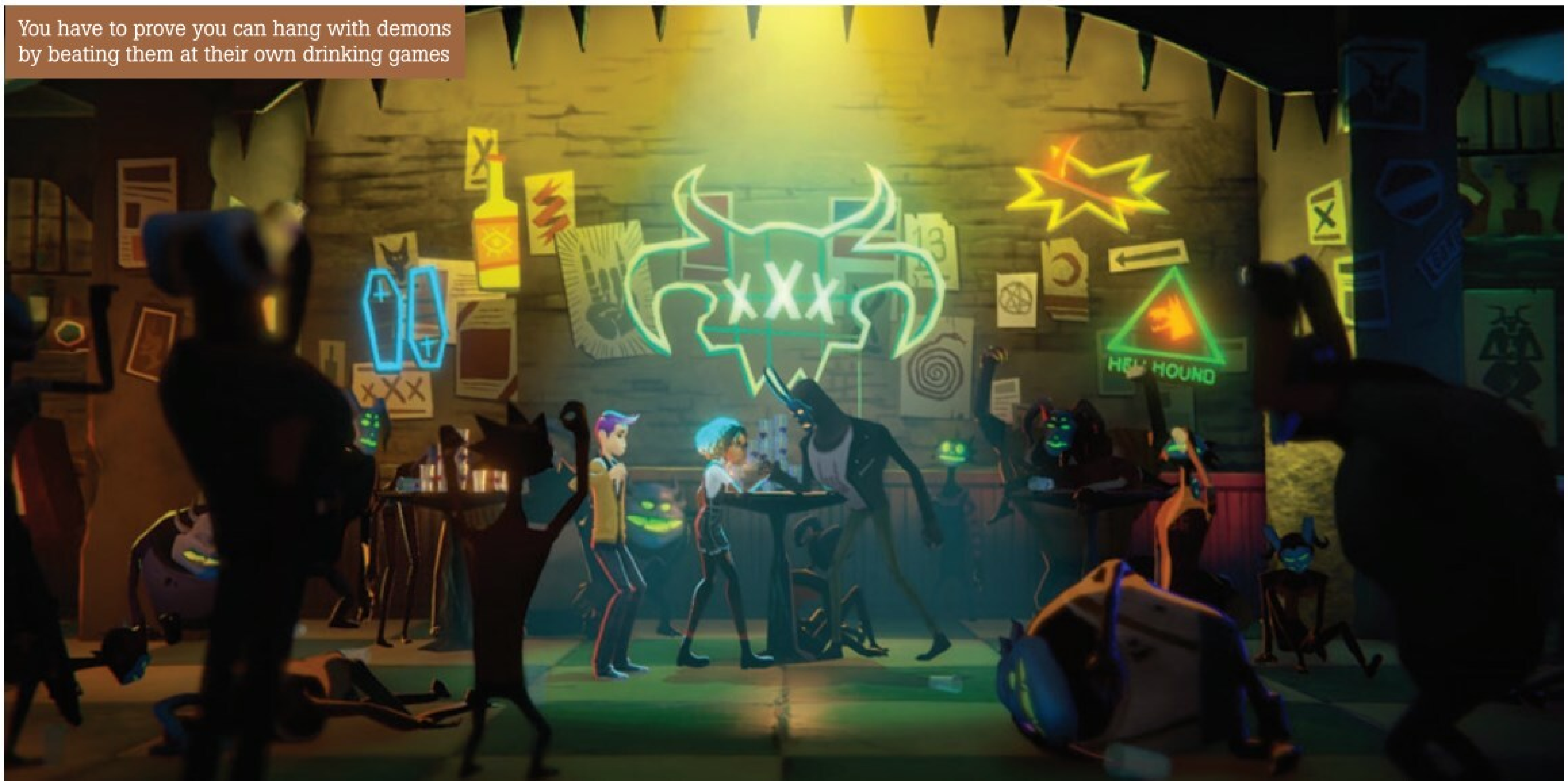
While sitting at the bar, the bartender offers Lola a drink of "hellcohol," which she dutifully pounds in a single shot, instilling her with confidence and thus extra dialogue options. When a drunk demon starts bothering Milo, Lola's extra dialogue options let her scream in his face to get out. Other drinks will get you other options, such as talking like a pirate until people get confused.

After meeting back up with Samantha, their tour guide explains there is one way out of Hell: Drink the devil under the table. If the pair can out-party the prince of lies, known below as the prince of partying, he'll open the door for them to go back home. The two finally have their heading, as impossible as the task may seem.

The art style of Afterparty makes it look like a stylistic CG cartoon, mixing together fun character animations with unique character designs. Much like Oxenfree, the natural writing brings the characters to life and their personalities are obvious right off the bat. Bringing the high-stakes of an eternity of torment to drinking games should make for a pretty good time when Afterparty releases in 2019.

» **Imran Khan**


Hell can be a pretty chill place when the business hours are over


You have to prove you can hang with demons by beating them at their own drinking games

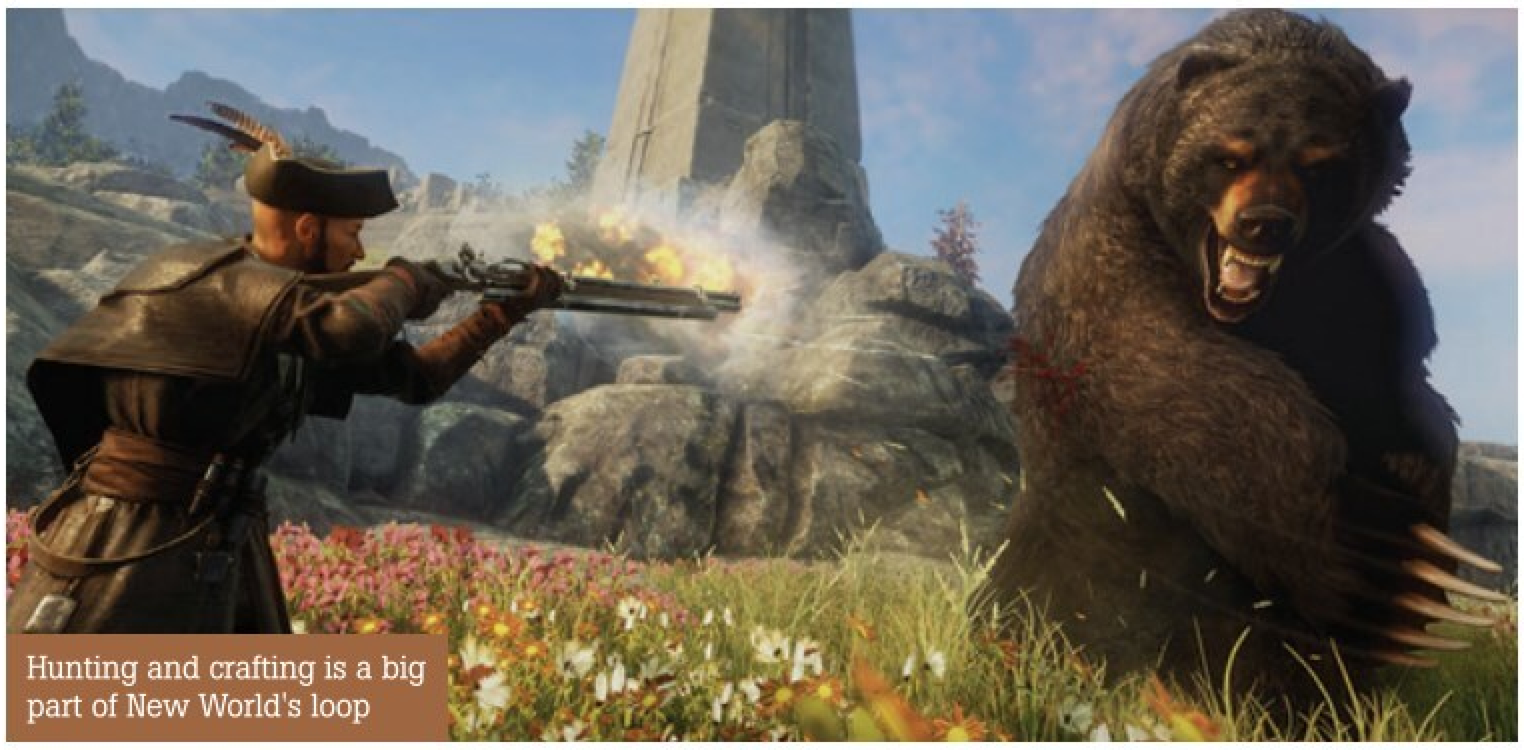
New World

Amazon explores terra incognita

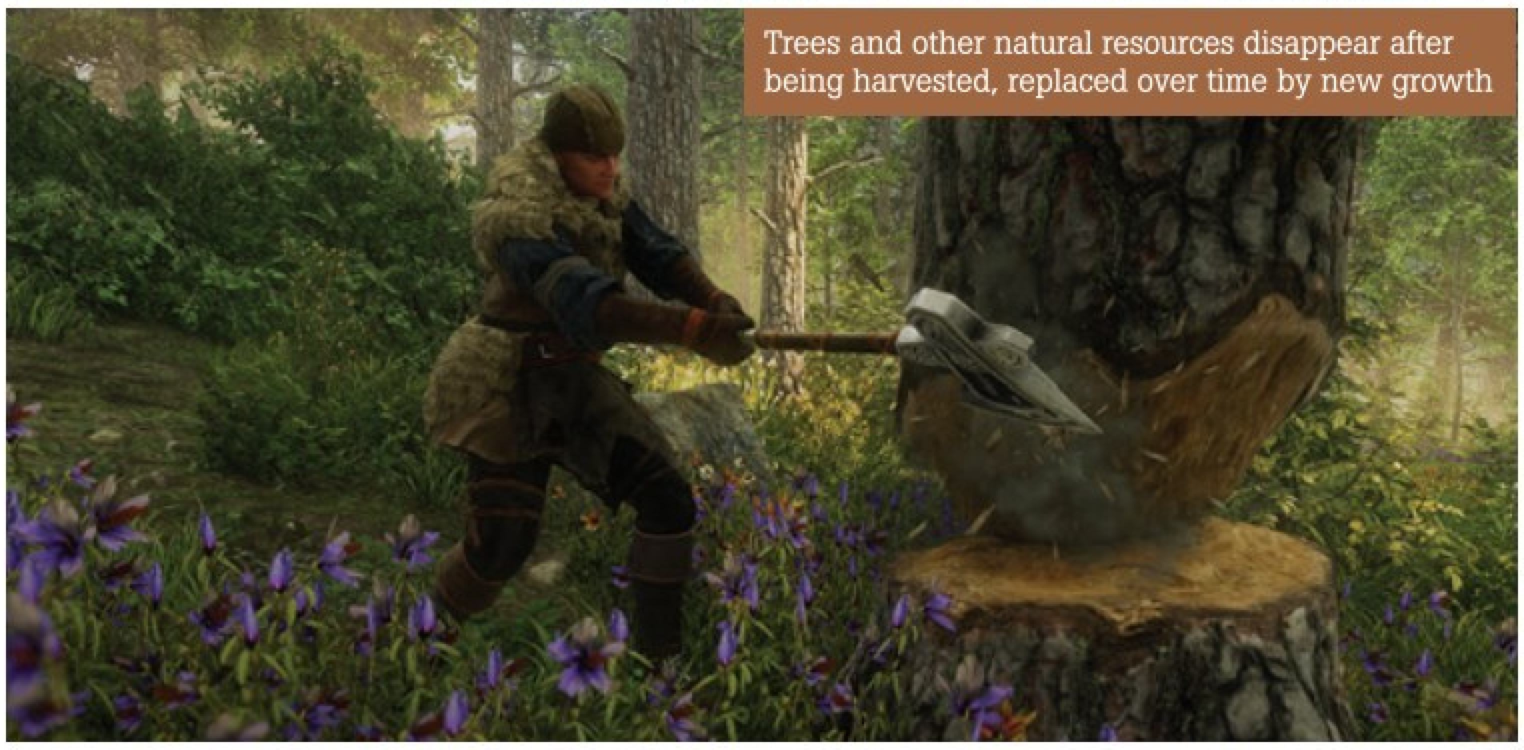
When the words "Amazon" and "video games" are mentioned in the same sentence, most of us probably think about online shopping. That's only part of the story. The company has been quietly building up a game-development presence over the past few years, which includes an upcoming racing game based on *The Grand Tour* television program. Amazon Game Studios is also working on an ambitious MMO called New World, which sets players loose on a supernatural continent in the 17th century, clearly inspired by colonialism, conquistadors, and the age of exploration. We talked to game director Scot Lane to learn more about the project, which seems to offer something for virtually every type of player.

Survival is a big component of New World, but Lane bristles at the idea of lumping their title in along with games like Ark, Rust, or The Forest. "We don't consider ourselves a survival game and try not to model against any particular genre. We try to do what is best for this game and our customers," he says.

"Our game has elements of survival, MMO, and even fighting games. If I had to put it in a genre it would be Sandbox MMO. We also have a deep progression system that not only makes your player's actions in the game better but also encourages specialization."



Hunting and crafting is a big part of New World's loop



Trees and other natural resources disappear after being harvested, replaced over time by new growth

New World's setting is one fraught with danger – whether in the form of hostile animals such as bears and wolves, or other players. That's why the game's social component is bound to be attractive to players who enjoy the security that companionship (and fortification) can offer. Players can harvest the world for resources to bolster defenses and conquer and claim territories. Those resources will replenish, but it takes time. That's why controlling territory can be so potentially lucrative. That's not to say, however, that solo players are going to be left in the cold.

"While New World is at the core a group-based PvP game centered on territory conflict, we're developing lots of opportunities for interesting, impactful, and unique solo play," Lane says. One of those opportunities comes in the form of courier contracts. Trade is a large component of the game, as are wars between rival companies. Solo players who remain neutral can help ferry goods between warring parties, lining their own pockets in the process.

And while solo players might not be able to build large fortifications on their own, they can access established outposts throughout the world to prevent getting ganked in the wild. "All outposts have local 'safe' storage so players can store items they've acquired without fear someone will take it," Lane says. He adds that a special camping trade skill caters to solo players, allowing them to craft things that other players can't. "In our alpha, our player who has played the most hours is a solo player," Lane says. "This caught us by surprise."

Whether you're looking to explore New World alone or want to band together with dozens of like-minded comrades, there seems to be plenty of opportunity for you on the horizon.
» **Jeff Cork**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
MMORPG

» **Publisher**
Amazon Game Studios

» **Developer**
Amazon Game Studios

» **Release**
TBA

World Of Warcraft Classic

Blast from the past

» Platform
PC • Mac

» Style
MMORPG

» Publisher
Blizzard Entertainment

» Developer
Blizzard Entertainment

» Release
Summer

While most additions to World of Warcraft take us forward into new expansions and new adventures, World of Warcraft Classic takes us way back to the very beginning. Players can engage with WoW as it was during the very early days, with only a few changes, mainly dealing with interface, convenience, and stability. Many aspects of the game long lost are back – weapon skill, talent trees, pet happiness, ammo, applied poisons, and more.

Leveling is long and arduous, mounts are a big achievement, and 40-person raiding experiences highlight the endgame once more. In addition, there is absolutely no looking-for-group or looking-for-raid tool – you're on your own to establish guilds or squawk in general chat hoping to find a group to take on Wailing Caverns or Deadmines. For some old grizzled veterans, this is exactly the experience they're looking for after years and years of streamlining and "casualization" to the core game. For others, these prospects are less enticing when the current game offers a plethora of up-to-date experiences and encounters.

Personally, I'm interested to go back and check out some of my favorite dungeons like Scholomance as they were in the time portal. Many of WoW's classic dungeons have been massively modified over the years and are unrecognizable compared to their original forms, with different bosses, loot tables, and areas. I enjoyed taking on the various teachers in rooms that are now gated off and the gargoyle from outside battle, and leveling up to visit my old undead friends might just be worth it.

Players can experience all WoW classic has to offer with their standard WoW subscription, so current players may be tempted to dip in as a novelty. Others may come back after a long hiatus or for the first time, to see the MMORPG that changed the gaming landscape forever. We'll find out just how well the nostalgia resonates next summer. » **Daniel Tack**

The epic battle with Ragnaros in Molten Core will once again be a big deal

Level through zones long abandoned or changed in the Cataclysm like Westfall

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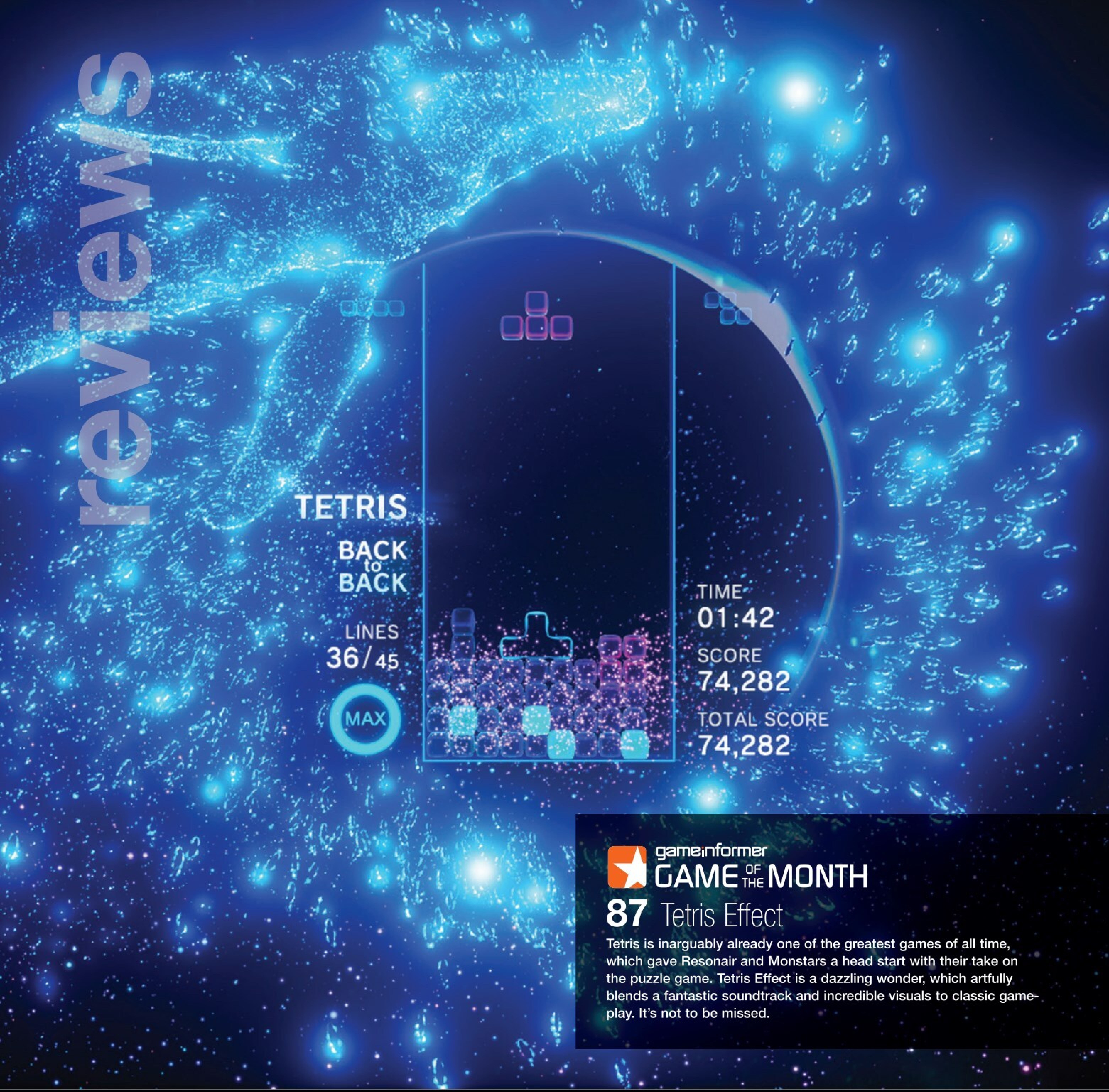

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

87 Tetris Effect

Tetris is inarguably already one of the greatest games of all time, which gave Resonair and Monstars a head start with their take on the puzzle game. Tetris Effect is a dazzling wonder, which artfully blends a fantastic soundtrack and incredible visuals to classic gameplay. It's not to be missed.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Number of years until E3 takes place in a derelict K-Mart.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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Battlefield V

Hedge warfare

8

Style 1-Player Shooter (64-Player Online) **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** DICE **Release** November 15 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Battlefield returns to World War II with a new live-service model, which means much of its headlining content isn't here yet

» Graphics
DICE has always made beautiful games, and Battlefield V is no exception. Each of the varied locations is a sight to behold, and its use of destructibility in multiplayer is second to none

» Sound
From the crack of weapon fire to the rumbling destruction of a V1 rocket, the sound effects in this shooter are the genre standard bearer. Its only weakness is location-based sound; I wish it were easier to hear the approaching footsteps of enemies when positioned in interiors

» Playability
The reworked gunplay is snappy and predictable, which helps land the time-to-kill in a sweet spot between traditional Battlefield and hardcore mode

» Entertainment
Battlefield V is a good, if safe game that feels more iterative than innovative. Its legacy will likely be defined by how steady and interesting the stream of new content is moving forward

» Replay Value
High

They say all is fair in love and war, but Battlefield fans disagree. The lead-up to the series' return to World War II was firebombed by controversies centered on the role of women in virtual warfare, the perceived lack of authenticity in the new soldier-customization system, and confusion over what exactly would be in the game on launch day. Once the dust settled and we finally stormed into the battle ourselves, the resulting game is far from the charred husk of Battlefield's remains many haters anticipated. In fact, Battlefield V is the safest release in the franchise's history.

The series' reputation for combat that emphasizes teamplay and large-scale warfare across land, air, and sea remains fully intact. Battlefield V urges players to squad up with others and cooperate to achieve success, demanding more from its audience than lone-wolf multiplayer games that encourage running and gunning with abandon.

Small changes can make big differences, and the most noticeable and appreciated improvement in Battlefield V directly affects your primary action: shooting. DICE reworked its ballistics system to remove random bullet deviation and deliver more predictable spray patterns for all its weapons. Gone are the days of simply taming a weapon. Now you can learn each rifle's nuances and master its use, knowing when to let off the trigger to land a kill. Along with other subtle tweaks to aiming, the time-to-kill feels much faster as a result, finding the sweet spot between the more spongy Battlefield games of yore and the frantic one-shot-kills of hardcore mode.

Squad play is the heart of the series, and Battlefield V reinforces cooperation with a few subtle and smart changes. Health no longer fully regenerates, and soldiers don't spawn with an overabundance of ammo, encouraging squads to enlist medic and support classes. The reworked spotting system only allows recon players to individually mark targets (others can merely point to general areas), making them more vital than ever to the team's cause. The class balance between the four roles may be the best it's been to date; my only major complaints thus far are related to weapon variety for medics.

Playing together has always earned players more points in Battlefield, but this year's Squad Reinforcements system further encourages collaboration. Each team action slowly nets the squad points, which the leader can use to call in resupplies, order vehicles, or if they save up enough points, unleash a devastating rocket onto enemies. I like the idea of rewarding teamplay, but the system doesn't share the wealth. Only squad leaders get points for the V1 rocket kills, which should be divided among the entire squad.

Teamplay gets another boost thanks to the new fortifications system, which allows soldiers to bolster defensive positions at predetermined places with sandbags, barbed wire, and even weapon emplacements. This addition feels long overdue and fits perfectly into the Battlefield motif. That said, defense still isn't incentivized enough; players are still more prone to chase flags in older modes like Conquest rather than hunker down and hold a position.

Each of the eight maps is compatible with the six game modes Battlefield V currently features. Old favorites return, plus Battlefield 1's popular

Operations (which is rebranded here as Breakthrough). Battlefield V's signature mode is Grand Operations, which preserves the multi-map battle format of its predecessor but sprinkles in a variety of other modes along the way. This change isn't for the better, as some modes kill the tension and focused objectives that made Operations such a thrill. When Grand Operations maps open up to include more than three objectives at once, the battles become scattered and lose their intensity.

Intensity is also scarce in the War Stories, the single-player campaign formatted like short stories. I love the concept of telling seldom-heard tales about war heroes who rose to the occasion in impossible circumstances, and DICE created interesting characters who each educate us about lesser-known fights during World War II. I also appreciated the somber, revering tone the developers adopt to bring these three tales to life. But presentation aside, the missions feel rote, and rarely tap into the Battlefield magic of large-scale warfare.

Regardless of which multiplayer mode you are playing, your experience feeds into a complex progression system that allows you to unlock new weapons, specializations, gadgets, and cosmetics for each class. A currency system lets you buy more cosmetics, but the storefront feels like a conceptual test right now, with a shortage of items to purchase.

Battlefield V's new Company hub is your one-stop shop to customize your weapons, apparel, and vehicles, but doesn't offer the flexibility longtime Battlefield fans expect. To reach its potential, we need to be able to save multiple configurations for each class so we can quickly swap between loadouts. For example, we should able to swap an Assault soldier armed with a long-range scope for one better suited for close-quarter battles on the fly.

Minor but persistent annoyances are also common on the warfront. While the new movement system looks good, soldiers have problems vaulting over small embankments and they sometimes clip through cover when prone or during revive animations. DICE's stubborn approach to squad spawns means soldiers still appear out of nowhere in the middle of battle; this is especially annoying when you are engaged in a one-on-one firefight and suddenly you are vastly outnumbered.

Battlefield V's legacy won't stand on the content currently in the game. Ultimately, it will be defined by the success or failure of the pending Combined Arms cooperative mode, Firestorm battle-royale mode, and whether or not DICE can continually provide new and engaging content. On day one, the game feels a few reinforcements short to pull off the overwhelming victory we've come to expect given the series' strong lineage. » **Matt Bertz**

Fallout 76

Over encumbered

6

Style 24-Player Online Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks
Developer Bethesda Game Studios **Release** November 14 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Bring players together to explore a wasteland teeming with irradiated beasts and technical issues

» Graphics
West Virginia's rolling hills create great views from afar, but lose their luster up close. Bland lightning and texture work show the engine's age, and enemy movements are glitchy and hard to read in combat scenarios

» Sound
The best soundtrack for the series yet. From classic tunes to the menacing orchestrated score, the music makes combat more intense and the world more fun to investigate. Enemy and ambient sounds are also quite good, giving you a good read on what is nearby

» Playability
The controls (carried over from Fallout 4) function well. VATS remains reliable, even without the time freezing. Managing hunger and thirst is a tedious pain

» Entertainment
When Fallout 76 is working as intended, it's an easy game to lose yourself in, as meaningful discoveries are everywhere. But those moments are often destroyed by glitches, crashes, and technical issues

» Replay Value
Moderate

The super mutants pressed their attack and my health worsened. As I weaved in and out of dilapidated buildings searching for a temporary safe zone to heal up and find a weapon that could handle this threat, the mutants' numbers grew. They closed in on my location; their machine-gun fire intensifying, and their grenade tosses becoming more accurate. I couldn't win this fight, but I was determined to go down in a blaze of glory, hopefully picking off a few before I collapsed. I aimed my firearm at the door, but they didn't enter. For a moment there was silence.

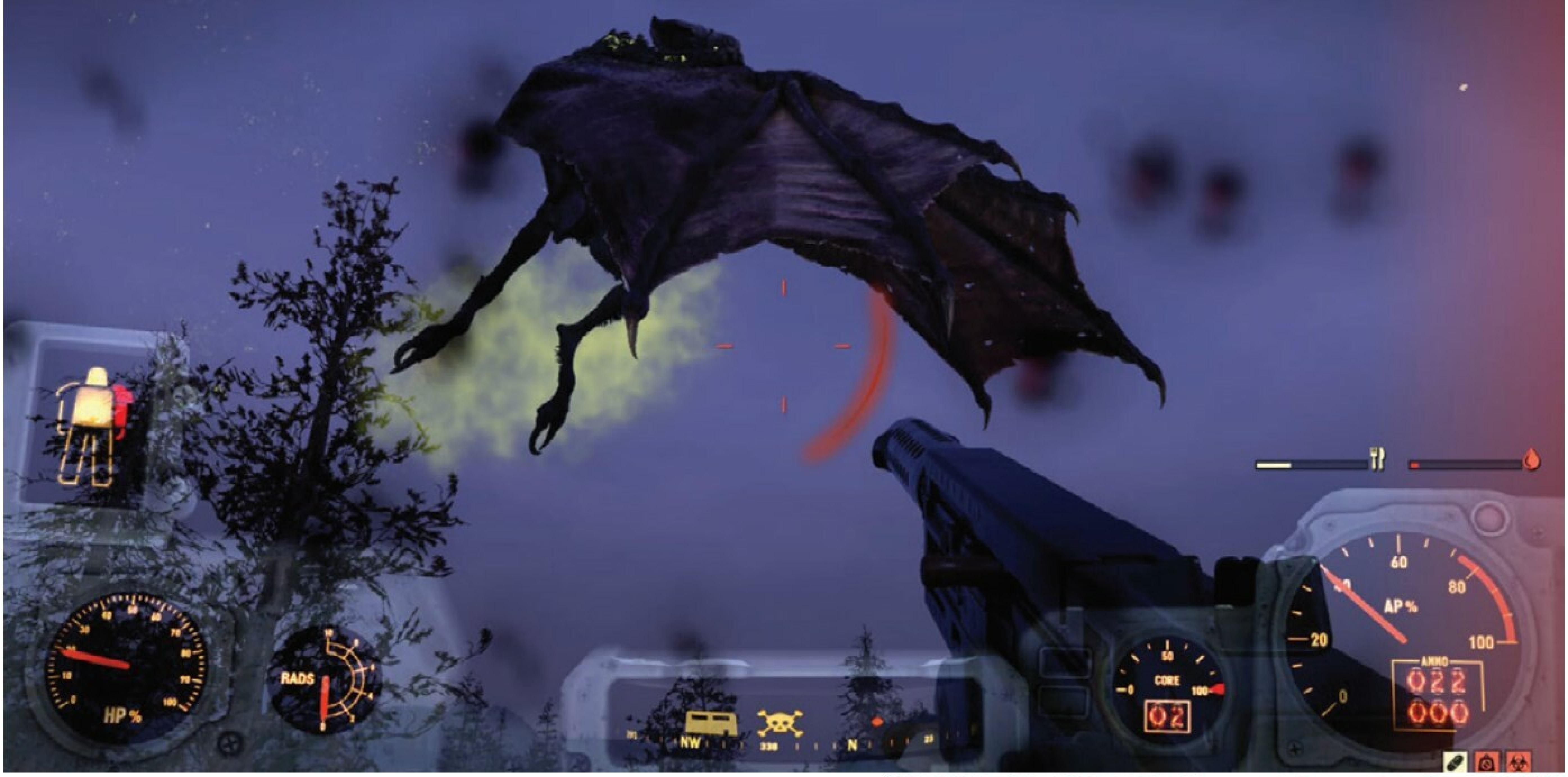
When the rattling of machine guns returned, I realized the bullets weren't flying my way. I peeked outside of the door to see the mutants were now exchanging blows with an agitated Grafton Monster. I dashed up a set of stairs to a rooftop to watch the chaos unfold. From this vantage point I saw I wasn't alone. Another player decked out in power armor arrived to clean up the mess. I assisted how I could, and when the last mutant body hit the ground, engaged in small talk with my savior. I handed him a rare sniper rifle as a thank you for the assist.

In this singular moment, Fallout 76 shows us why it can be great. The injection of other players into Fallout's tried-and-true framework creates unpredictable cooperative scenarios and the chance to make new friends. My journey through West Virginia's wasteland was filled with fascinating developments just like this one, but the greatest danger I faced wasn't from an irradiated beast or the bloodlust of another player – it was the stability of the game itself. From server dumps and crashes to bosses getting stuck in walls and enemies magically appearing out of thin air, Fallout 76 struggles to deliver an experience players can trust. For an online game of this ilk, this can (and likely will) lead to disaster.

The excuse of "all Bethesda Game Studios games launch buggy" is not a safety net or a get-out-of-jail-free card. Players cannot reload the game or access earlier saves to undo the potential harm that is inflicted when the game misfires. If something terrible happens, you have to live with it. Given how unstable the game is and how frequently glitches occur, your playthrough can upend within seconds.

In a fight against a level 50 scorch beast, my team brought out all of its heavy weaponry – gear that was obtained over 60 hours of play. We saved these armaments for an encounter just like this one, unloading mini nukes, chain guns, and missiles against the difficult adversary. Its health fell to half, and we could almost taste victory, but then the beast disappeared into a wall, reappearing occasionally for a few seconds at a time. We laughed at the silliness of this buggy encounter, but knew we would be rewarded for our efforts soon. The monster then regained all of its health, and our laughter subsided. We wondered if this was another glitch. We again pressed on, thinking we could achieve victory. The server then crashed. Not only did we fail the fight, all of that time we spent building up an arsenal ended up going to waste because the game malfunctioned three times in different ways.

I went into Fallout 76 thinking that not having NPC humans to interact with would hurt the story and in turn affect the enjoyability of exploration. The solidarity of being one of the lone survivors in the wasteland is actually kind of cool, and although narrative content is delivered at a slower pace, it's usually interesting. You basically take on the role of an archaeologist who studies the final moments in people's lives. You learn what they were doing right before the bombs fell –



often hearing their voices in audio recordings. Being a detective in an irradiated graveyard is a different hook for Fallout, but it works well, and gives this entry a decidedly different feel. Yes, it is disappointing player choice has been stripped from the equation, but the world-building is as deep as ever, even without crafted characters populating it.

As interesting as the victims' stories are, the missions don't always follow suit, and are often massive time sinks that send players all over the wasteland to fetch items. Since fast travel comes with a sizable fee of Caps (the in-game currency), you sometimes find yourself walking great distances just to drop off an item or log into a computer. In one mission, the game does a great job of poking fun at the frustration of going to the DMV. You're tasked with getting an ID card, but the robot who is running this place isn't satisfied with your paperwork and needs to you to fill out a different form, then get a birth certificate, then a marked envelope with your address, and so on and so forth. This mission is nicely crafted, but ends up looking foolish, since some of the missions before it are just as tedious in design, sending the player back and forth between the same locations over and over again.

While most missions pit players against Fallout's familiar assortment of enemies, West Virginia's folklore is used to bring some great new threats to life, such as the Mothman and Flatwoods Monster. Hunting these legends down is a fun side activity. I also enjoyed the optional events, which bring players together to take on waves of enemies or to solve specific problems in a set amount of time.

If your intent is to stick to the critical path, prepare for some wild difficulty spikes. A dungeon consisting of enemies at level 10 may conclude with a boss at level 32. The game doesn't give any indication that the spike is coming, and you may find yourself in a no-win situation.

While I basked in the quiet moments of exploring on my own and making interesting discoveries I would later share with friends, the game is better (and more forgiving) when played with a full team of four. Not only are you gaining benefits from a shared card in the excellently designed S.P.E.C.I.A.L. system, but you are better prepared for huge swings in difficulty. Sharing resources and camp spaces with friends makes a big difference, and it's just a good time wandering the wilds with other people.

Don't be surprised if your friends fill you headset with complaints about hunger and thirst. Managing those meters is a constant pain that becomes slightly more manageable later when a fully furnished camp is pumping out clean water and crops. The camp building works well and is almost identical in design to Fallout 4, with the addition of players being able to blueprint them and move them to different locations. The Cap cost to move camps is a bit high, but having that option is handy, especially if you want to drop off junk at your stashbox or change out supplies before taking on a mission.

Fallout 76 isn't designed to be the next installment in the core Fallout series, but Bethesda wants it to feel like a direct extension of it. Combat, menu management, exploration, and all of the gameplay loops are just like Fallout 4's, which is a good thing. These systems hold up and deliver a great degree of fun. Yes, there's a little bit of clunk and rust to combat, but it is all reliable to a degree. Even

VATS, which no longer freezes time, can be used to effectively pick off difficult foes.

Don't think for a second these mechanics will create enjoyable PvP encounters. Most of my battles against other players ended up looking like circus routines with groups of players bouncing around wildly. There's no great benefit to player battles, either, other than being a jerk to other wanderers.

We have to wait to see if Bethesda creates a robust endgame for Fallout 76, but right now the goal is to launch a nuke, take down a difficult boss, and gain gear that will hopefully be used for something new at a future time. Yes, the nukes are a sight to behold.

Before we can even think of what might come next, Bethesda needs to make the core game more stable and fair. While I found it to be mostly enjoyable from an exploration standpoint, the frequency of server crashes, freezes, and technical issues is unacceptable. The foundation for another fun Fallout experience is in place, but you end up watching it crumble before your eyes as you play. The game just isn't ready for showtime.

» Andrew Reiner

Call Of Cthulhu

A true test of sanity

6.75

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Focus Home Entertainment **Developer** Cyanide Studio **Release** October 30 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
A descent into Lovecraftian madness that struggles with gameplay variety and player choice

» **Graphics**
The environments show off a high level of realism and a slight hint of being detached from reality. The robotic character models clash against these backdrops, but most of the big story moments occur in cutscenes with more detailed characters

» **Sound**
The voice acting is good, but odd tonal shifts sometimes occur in the interrogations. The soundtrack and ambience are effective in setting the tone and delivering a couple of nicely timed jump scares

» **Playability**
Even with plenty of gameplay variety and player choice sewn in, the experience feels like it's on rails and that your decisions don't really add up to much

» **Entertainment**
A slow and frustrating burn that culminates in a big and satisfying way

» **Replay Value**
Moderately low

Within just minutes of starting Call of Cthulhu, a grim picture is painted for both protagonist Edward Pierce and the player controlling him. For Pierce, that picture consists of tentacled demons, distortions in reality, and voices swimming through his dreams. For the player, the horror takes the form of gameplay – all of it basking in an ugly haze, as none of the ideas appear to be fully realized. From the realization that most of your choices don't matter to stealth sequences that are downright infuriating, Call of Cthulhu can be maddening to the bone.

The player is introduced to Pierce in a disturbing dream sequence that appears to depict his death at the hands (and tentacles) of a demonic priest. Pierce is startled awake, and we see he fell asleep in his detective's office, which is littered with empty whiskey bottles and sleeping pill containers – his way of dealing with PTSD from his service in the first World War. Pierce is hired to investigate the work of a painter who died in a house fire, and this journey eventually takes him to an old whaling port called Darkwater. This story setup is excellently crafted, as it sows doubt about Pierce's mental stability. It also puts the player in an odd position when it comes to making choices, as many of Pierce's thoughts are guided by depression and uncertainty.

The world Pierce explores is overflowing with intrigue and is creepy in a way that gets under your skin. While there is some choice of movement at Darkwater, the player is mostly moving from one location to the next to click on objects that light up in the environment and talk to locals to piece together the crime. This is where Call of Cthulhu begins to unravel.

Although conversations give the player plenty of ways to interrogate people, most of the outcomes are the same, and the choices you make usually just produce a different line of dialogue. These results kill any hope of doing actual detective work, as there are no fail states. Almost every choice funnels to the same conclusion no matter how much you try to steer it in a different direction. The investigations also don't deliver much in terms of sleuthing, and simply push the player to interact with all of the glowing icons in the environment to piece together the crime. You don't feel like you're accomplishing much during these investigations, other than clicking something to move the narrative forward one more step.

Trademark elements of H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos slither their way into the game, but most of the content is adapted from Chaosium's pen-and-paper RPG series that began in 1981. The RPG elements make the lack of actual choice more confounding. As progress is made, the player earns attribute points that can level up Pierce's investigative skills, allowing him to be more adept in areas like psychology, eloquence, and occultism. Being proficient in one of these categories opens up new conversation choices and may allow you to spot something else in the environment you normally wouldn't see. However, using these techniques doesn't produce much more than a different line of dialogue or a seemingly meaningless clue. Even though the game sometimes tells you your decisions will "affect your destiny," you end up feeling like you are on a guided path that is sometimes rocked by frustrating gameplay variations.

Whenever Pierce has to hide, trouble arises. The player is mostly tasked to duck behind objects, survey the A.I.'s patterns, and progress when the path is clear. These sections are dull, and slow down an already plodding experience. The player also has to engage in a stealth-driven boss battle that suffers from a lack of direction. I died over and over again, and only succeeded by exhausting all options through experimentation.

As taxing as the action can be at times, Call of Cthulhu impresses in its final act. It starts out slow and rough, but settles into a groove when Pierce really begins to lose his mind. While the gameplay itself fails to impress or entertain, the story remains strong throughout the entire experience, and keeps you on edge, wondering if a Great Old One is on the verge of reawakening or if everything we are seeing is just in Pierce's mind. The potential of either path being the real one bounces in and out of focus, keeping you guessing right up until the awesome conclusion. In these final moments, player choice is actually realized.

Call of Cthulhu may not be fun to play, and often feels like an amusement ride that is just pulling you along, but it succeeds in delivering a mind-bending story that lives up to the Lovecraftian breed of cosmic horror. In the end, I'm glad I played it, but for roughly five or six hours, I questioned why I was subjecting myself to it.

» **Andrew Reiner**

Overkill's The Walking Dead

A camp not worth defending

Style 1 to 4-Player Online Action **Publisher** Starbreeze Publishing **Developer** Overkill Software **Release** November 6 **Rating** M

4.5

PC

» Concept
Defend your camp, gather supplies, and confront the living and the dead in this drab adaptation of the popular series

» Graphics
Muddy and dark may match the series' aesthetic, but these environments lack creativity or detail

» Sound
A suitably grim soundtrack works in this zombie apocalypse, even if it's only a few pieces to enjoy while you wait at menus

» Playability
Gameplay systems are poorly explained, the early hours are hard to digest, and controls feel rigid

» Entertainment
A deep progression system isn't enough to save these survivors from repetitive and poorly balanced missions

» Replay Value
Low

Sometimes a game just doesn't work out. Despite lots of time, a strong property, and capable development talent, the experience fails to solidify. In the case of Overkill's The Walking Dead, major technical problems and connection issues, baffling gameplay systems and controls, tedious combat and stealth, and poorly structured missions all contrive to halt the fun. A deep and rewarding upgrade and progression path hides behind the mess, but you're unlikely to enjoy it, as the game fails to offer meaningful engagement.

In this four-player, first-person survival shooter, players take on new characters in The Walking Dead universe, but face gruesome challenges similar to those seen in the comic and TV shows. Working as a team, you scavenge for supplies and face off against enemy survivor groups, then defend your camp from those who would take what you have. The story is too bare-bones to hold up to scrutiny, though I appreciate the effort to surprise, including at least one cool character twist.

While purporting to be balanced for solo players or teams of various sizes, most missions are profoundly disheartening with anything less than a full four-person team. That's a big problem, because matchmaking is spotty, and is often unable to find me a matching team. Load times are long, and failure in a mission means starting over from the beginning. This can result in losing 30 minutes of progress or more, with paltry rewards to show for the effort. When the game does manage to find a match, I'm often thrown in halfway through with the team already most of the way to failure. I've also encountered many hard crashes, together amounting to hours of lost progress.

Enemies are a mix of mindless undead and nearly mindless enemy survivors. The human enemies lack any of the tactical complexity you'd expect from any FPS of the last 10 years, often standing together in groups as you gun them down, even as they fail to animate in response to a hail of submachine gun bullets.

Gunplay is stiff and unresponsive. More prominent and frequent are lengthy sections of unsatisfying melee engagements. Whether bashing with a baseball bat or slashing with a machete, the close-up battles lack variety or panache, and regularly devolve into long stretches of standing in a doorway and repeatedly smashing the left mouse button for minutes at a time. A lackluster stealth system may as well be absent; it lacks sufficient cues to help you be successful, and the level design and enemy placements provide too few opportunities to be sneaky. A punishing sound meter discourages the use of your more interesting weapons and abilities, since it means that the zombie horde will soon descend. Upon death, an infuriatingly long respawn timer gives you just enough time to fume about the futility and loss of your free time.

The relatively small number of environments are confusing to navigate, with procedurally placed elements that frustrate as often as not, as you scramble around attempting to find the necessary jumper cables or gasoline. You're encouraged to spend increasingly boring stretches scouring for additional bullets and supplies, slowing down any momentum a mission might have had.

The lone standout success is a rewarding progression system, which offers a lot to explore and plenty of opportunities for experimentation. Classes have their own leveling trees to improve abilities, though I would have liked more flexibility to customize what weapon skills each character can improve. As it is, if you like a particular ability, like the Scout's smoke grenade, you're obligated to go with her crossbow and pickaxe. Additional supplies let you upgrade your camp in a variety of ways, but you must balance your expenditures against the ongoing upkeep needs of your survivors, which makes for a compelling tension. As you gather more survivors, you can alternately send them out on missions or set them to work in the camp for some handy bonuses. Finally, a wide variety of weapons can be modded and improved over time. I appreciate the feature, but it also means you're wielding especially clumsy weapons in the early hours. Nonetheless, the growth of your camp and characters provides a sense that your missions have meaning, and may be enough to push you back into another banal scavenging run.

Overkill's The Walking Dead plans to dole out content in seasons, so the current batch of missions will soon expand. But dramatic reworking of most core combat and mission systems are necessary before the game is worthy of a recommendation. The premise sounds promising for fans of cooperative play, zombie action, and the taut survival storylines implied by the license. The execution fails to meet the needs of any of those groups. You're better off heeding the warning – keep this menacing door closed, and leave the zombies to their gnawing hunger. » **Matt Miller**

Hitman 2

A worthy investment for expert executioners

8

Style 1-Player Action (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment **Developer** IO Interactive **Release** November 13 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Agent 47 returns to stalk and assassinate his prey in a series of massive, highly replayable playgrounds

» Graphics
The sprawling levels are richly detailed and packed with crowds of NPCs

» Sound
While the main cast is solid, other NPC voice performances can be downright embarrassing

» Playability
IO Interactive continues to refine the core mechanics, making it easier than ever to pull off your plans

» Entertainment
The Hitman formula still demands extraordinary patience and a fondness for replaying the same levels, but fans of 2016's reboot will find plenty to love

» Replay Value
High

With 2016's episodic experiment firmly in the rearview mirror, Agent 47 is back with another full itinerary of places to go and people to execute. While Hitman 2's globetrotting adventure suffers from the same shortcomings as its predecessor, the new locations and clever assassination opportunities remind me why I've remained a fan of the series all these years.

The Hitman games have always adhered to a simple formula, and Hitman 2 is no exception: After arriving in a new (and increasingly large) level, the bald and barcoded assassin must track down and execute his target. However, simply walking up and shooting them won't net you many accolades. Instead, the magic and replayability of Hitman lies in exploring the environments, donning disguises, and devising stealthy and creative executions that leave no trace. Why garrote an enemy when you can cause their sports car to malfunction during a race, or give your target an extra-close shave while posing as their barber?

My one major criticism of Hitman 2 remains a holdover from the previous installment: Each map is now so massive that it demands a hefty time investment just to learn, and the organic discovery of a level's set-piece executions has taken a backseat to in-game guides that hold your hand through each step in Agent 47's elaborate schemes. Hitman's signature assassinations have always been puzzles, and nowadays you can either have all the answers splayed out in front of you or blindly stumble through them via hours of frustrating trial-and-error. Thankfully, these scripted assassinations are far from the only way to dispatch your targets, and my options and enjoyment opened up once I pushed past the learning curve.

Though some problems come with Hitman 2's levels being the biggest in the series, they are also among the most memorable, including an opulent billionaire's high-tech headquarters and racetrack in Miami, and the sprawling slums of Mumbai. Some locations, like the village, coca fields, and cartel mansion of Santa Fortuna, feel like three full-fledged levels fused together, offering a welcome change of scenery and scenarios as you scratch off the targets on your hit list.

The signature executions this time around are worth the extra effort they require, and range from coaxing a carnivorous hippo into eating his owner to helping an incompetent assassin perform your hits for you. These moments, along with 47 giving the worst house tour ever while posing as a real-estate agent, kept me engaged and entertained during multiple playthroughs of each level, as did the wealth of challenges to pursue. I'm still not compelled to replay levels for as long as the game wants me to, but I had significantly more fun returning to locations than I did in the last game. Minor improvements like picture-in-picture alerts of important events and the ability to hide in foliage smooth out the gameplay, making it more enticing to dive back in.

IO tries to tell a more compelling story than the previous game, though the results are mixed. The developer smartly focuses on fleshing out 47's past and his handler Diana Burnwood, and a mysterious new figure provides some extra intrigue. Unfortunately, the narrative is told through glorified storyboard sequences rather than actual cutscenes. Watching the camera pan across still images of characters as they converse just feels cheap and disappointing, especially given the previous quality of the series' cinematics – and how good the in-game engine looks.

Players can also partake in a handful of peripheral modes, but they are largely forgettable. The shining exception is Sniper Assassin, which builds on the previous spin-offs and tasks players with sniping targets from a single location. Sniper Assassin provides a fun and exciting break from the slow and methodical pace of the main game – but unfortunately the mode only offers a single level to shoot up. The Ghost multiplayer mode is also a frustrating disappointment, contorting the stealth-oriented action into a competitive race that the gameplay isn't really suited for.

Like Agent 47 himself, Hitman 2 doesn't take a lot of chances – instead it continues honing its underlying formula to a deadly precision. A part of me still longs for the smaller and more digestible maps of the older games, but I can't argue with IO's execution here – the levels, and memorable assassination opportunities they hold, are worth the investment.

» Jeff Marchiafava

Darksiders III

A quality experience from another age

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** THQ Nordic **Developer** Gunfire Games **Release** November 27 **Rating** M

The Darksiders series is a pastiche of beloved games and genres that came before it. The first two Darksiders entries wore their Zelda, God of War, Metroid, and Diablo inspirations proudly and generally found success, even if they never quite reached the heights of any of those singular games. Darksiders III is similar in that its main inspirations are still easy to spot, but Zelda no longer serves as the pillar on which the game is built. The focus has shifted away from puzzles and acquiring items, and toward combat and navigation upgrades that help you move through the larger world. The result is a game that feels familiar – and dated – but with gameplay and level design that sing, even when its story is awkwardly clearing its throat.

Darksiders III follows Fury, the angriest and most unpredictable member of the four horsemen of the apocalypse. She is on a mission from the Charred Council to track down the seven deadly sins who escaped imprisonment when the world went to hell. Unlike War and Death from the first two games, she is not concerned with what brought about the apocalypse, making her goals different – at least initially.

Another big change for Darksiders III is the larger structure. The first two games were like Zelda titles, with puzzle-focused levels spread across a larger explorable world. Fury's world is not broken apart in this way. In fact, I only solved a handful of puzzles across the entire experience. I personally loved those sequences in the previous games, but I did not miss them here. Moving through Darksiders III feels more like moving through a continuous series of interconnected areas with new movement abilities opening up more options for where Fury can go and what secrets she can uncover. The absence of a map is surprising, and I feared it would limit my ability to navigate, but the compass system does a good job directing you to your main objective, and secrets are broadcast well enough in the environment that they're easy to spot. In these ways Darksiders III stands apart from the first two games and I appreciate the change. It makes it feel more like a well-executed, straight-on action experience.

Fury uses a chain-whip as her main attack, which gives her a wide attack range to take on surprisingly powerful foes. She also unlocks a boomerang-like weapon, as well as a handful of secondary blades. You switch between the secondary blades without entering a menu, and they each grant her specific navigation abilities. The icy swords allow her to walk on water, freezing it below her feet. Her fiery dual blades give her the ability to traipse through lava. Each has plenty of combos, but I had more fun relying on standard attacks and focusing on dodging out of the way to execute powerful, perfectly-timed counters. Fury doesn't block (and sometimes yells at enemies derisively when they do), and it keeps the action brisk. She's always on the offensive, which I appreciate as an impatient fighter.

Every enemy, and especially the bosses, pose a substantial threat. Even the early foes can fell Fury if she gets sloppy or overwhelmed. This makes exploration cautious and tense, which I like, but the checkpoints can sometimes be unnecessarily spaced out. A few bosses in particular are plagued by faraway checkpoints that led me to sprint past enemies for long stretches just to give my most recently discovered boss another shot.

Hunting the sins is the most compelling element of the story, as Fury's goal is clear and the personifications of the sins each have interesting and unique designs. When the larger lore of the universe starts creeping in, however, things fall apart. Conspiracy theories run amok and important new characters are suddenly presented without a proper introduction. The final twists of the plot land with a thud, but I do like Fury and much of her dialogue. Among the heroes we have played so far in this series, she has the most personality and is my favorite.

In many ways, Darksiders III feels like a game from the previous console generation. Its art design is distinct, and feels like an old comic book with vibrant colors and villains that personify their names. But that's an old trope today, and it lacks the graphical detail we have come to expect in modern games. Compared to its action game competitors, the production values are lacking and I did run into distracting graphical hiccups and one full crash that required a reset. With all that said, I was eager to see what was around every corner. The world, the way Fury explores it, the few puzzles, and the combat are all well-designed, elevating it above the elements that make it feel like a game from the past. » **Kyle Hilliard**

8

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Continue the Darksiders story with Fury as she attempts to defeat the seven deadly sins on a post-apocalyptic earth

» Graphics
Visuals lack the detail we've come to expect in modern games. Darksiders III also has a few technical hiccups, but the animation is good and the world and character designs are distinct

» Sound
The score is stirring and elevates the stakes during exploration and boss fights, but the voice performances are hit and miss

» Playability
Fury moves through the world with grace, swapping quickly between navigation abilities. She lives up to her name in combat by fighting with an angry persistence that is fun to control

» Entertainment
What Darksiders III lacks in production values, it makes up for with good design. The smaller, personal elements of the story are interesting, but the larger picture is confusing

» Replay Value
Moderate

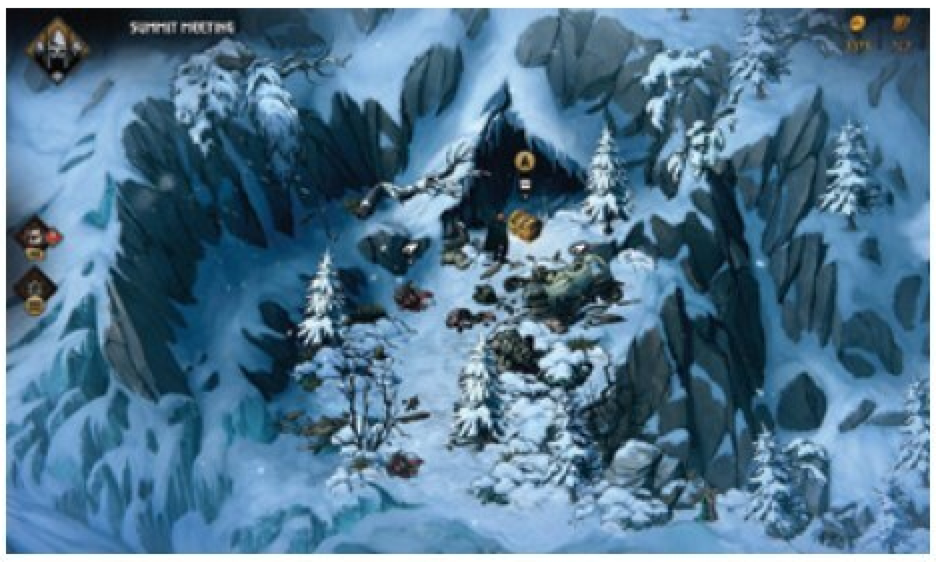
Thronebreaker: The Witcher Tales

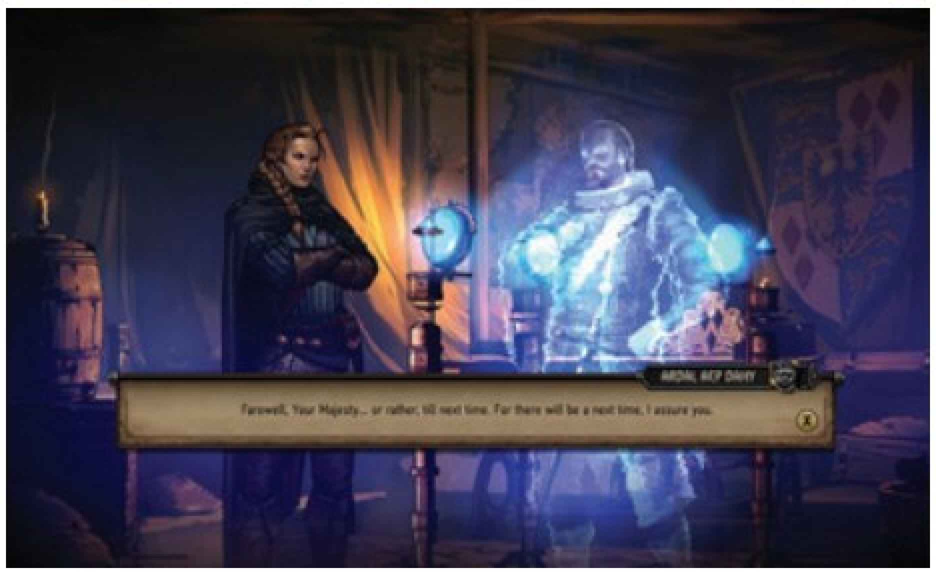
Tough calls, big payoffs

8.5

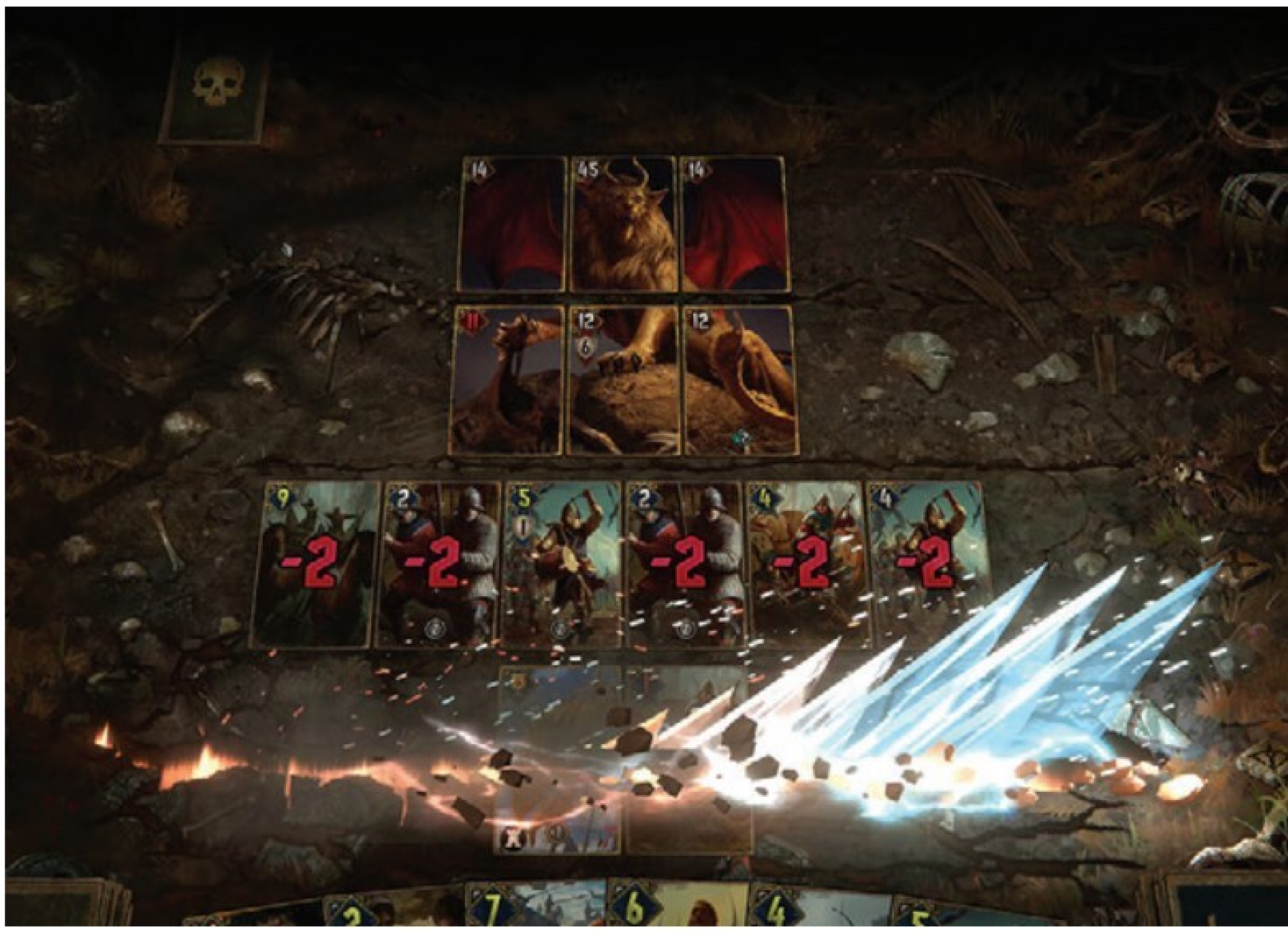
gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Strategy **Publisher** CD Projekt Red **Developer** CD Projekt Red **Release** October 23 **Rating** T





Farewell, Your Majesty... or rather, till next time. For there will be a next time, I assure you.



PC

» Concept
Build a meaty RPG-lite campaign out of Gwent's core concept, modifying cards to suit the story and infusing it with the Witcher's trademark character and choice-driven narrative

» Graphics
The interface and card interactions are smooth, and Thronebreaker's comic-book style exploration, conversations, and cutscenes bring its captivating story to life

» Sound
These voice performances are far better than you'd expect out of a campaign for a card game, with Lucy Black and Liam Garrigan delivering strong performances as Meve and Gascon

» Playability
Thronebreaker's isometric exploration makes navigating the world simple, if a bit slow before movement upgrades. Deck-building is also straightforward

» Entertainment
Thronebraker effortlessly infuses Gwent with the geopolitical underpinnings, fantasy tales, and difficult choices of The Witcher series

» Replay Value
High

Part of what makes Gwent so fun in The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt is how it is contextualized within the latter's fictional world. Plotlines have you building your deck across multiple matches, and occasional dialogue branches let you settle disputes with cards instead of swords. Thronebreaker, a new Gwent-based campaign set in the world of The Witcher, takes this concept to its logical conclusion, telling a new tale using Gwent as its core. It works surprisingly well, as the story delivers strong political intrigue, character moments, and tough moral choices. These all hold Thronebreaker together as the standard card-slinging gradually falters across dozens of hours.

Gwent retains its back-and-forth gameplay (which has since spun off into its own free-to-player multiplayer game) in Thronebreaker, though it's undergone several changes from its minigame iteration. Although the objective is still the same (build up an army one card at a time to win two out of three rounds), there are several more card interactions and abilities to consider, and spies are no longer the terror they used to be.

Thronebreaker uses these rules as its foundation, but alters cards to fit the campaign (and even lets you skip battles on the easiest difficulty). Many of the cards from the free-to-play multiplayer have completely different abilities, and several new cards offer some great new challenges. A fight against a griffin involves lopping off its individual limbs (represented as different cards on the board); fending off a group of thieves has one of them invading your side of the board. These battles further cement the importance of certain story beats, it was great to see that facing an opponent the story long foreshadowed didn't lead to a straightforward match.

Several fun puzzles find more creative uses for Gwent's rules – or break them altogether. I love the way these tie gameplay to story, like one that has you moving a character across the board to sneak past guards. I ended up liking the variety of these puzzle-oriented tasks more than the standard battles, since it's easy to build unstoppable decks after a few hours. This makes your victory in traditional encounters a forgone conclusion, which gets dull as the campaign goes on.

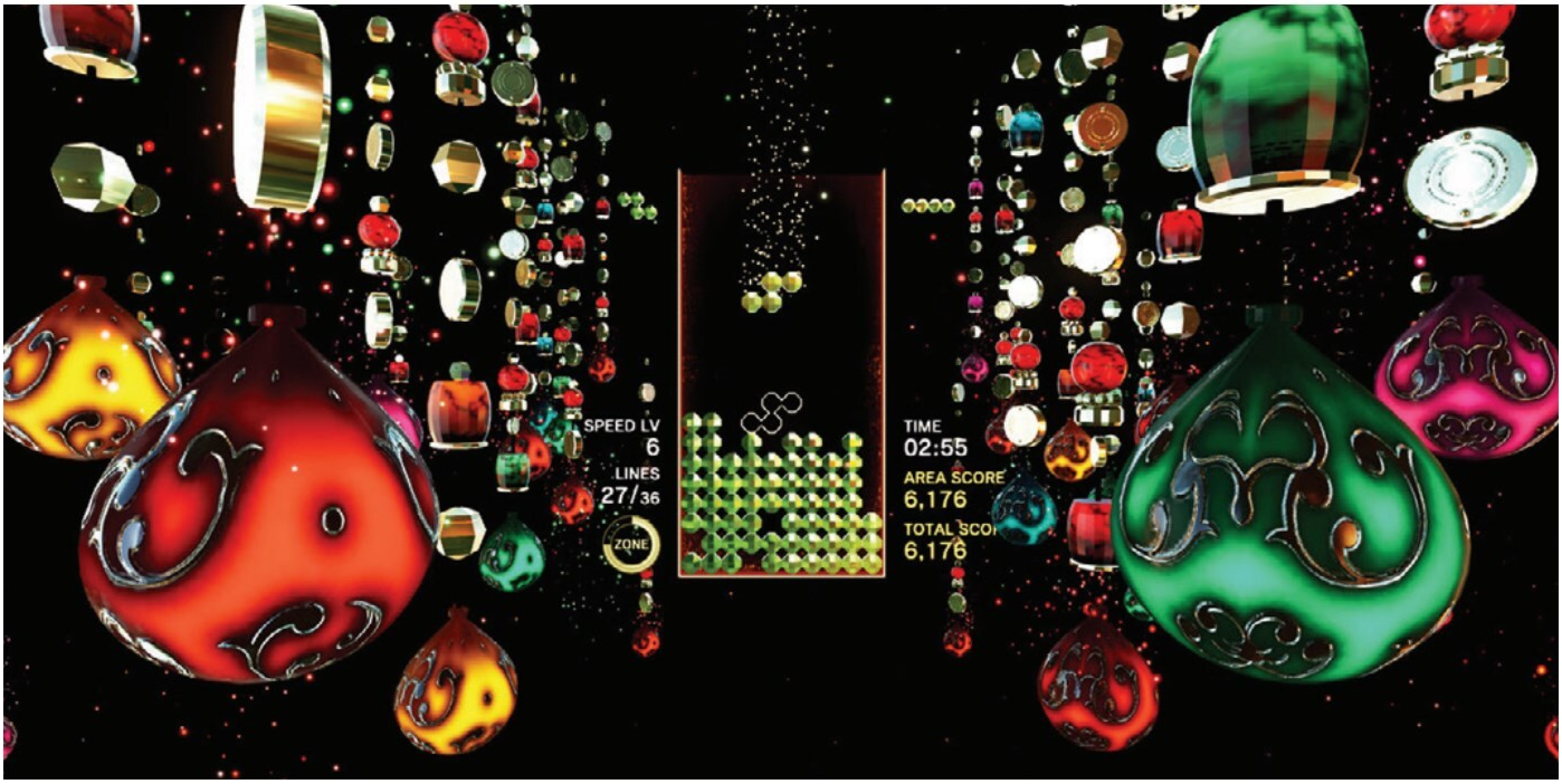
Although you spend a lot time playing Gwent in Thronebreaker, the narrative does a great job of propelling you from battle to battle. You play as Meve, Queen of Lyria and Rivia, as she attempts to fend off an impending Nilfgaardian invasion. Meve is a fantastic lead, a defiant ruler who refuses to back down from the overwhelming obstacles she faces even as her subordinates cower before Nilfgaard. Between her steely resolve and her tense, harsh moments with her son Villem, I was captivated by her tale.

She's joined by a strong cast of supporting characters, such as the conniving-but-lovable Gascon and Brouver Hoog, the strict king of the Dwarfs who forces Meve to play neutral with the Nilfgaardians within his realm. Although conversations play out in visual novel fashion, the animated comic-book style looks fantastic, and the performances and character animations are strong enough that I never felt like I was just reading text.

Choice also plays a large role in how your adventure plays out. As you explore a handful of large maps for resources that let you build up your deck, you come across plenty of moral quandaries. Some are simple, like deciding whether to spend money to bury a peasant to raise your troops' morale. Others can have major ramifications on how the story plays out, and even if certain party members (and the powerful cards they add to your deck) leave your side. These decisions can play out in various ways, and I was pleasantly surprised when some decisions I was adamant about came back to bite me.

Thronebreaker is a great alternative for fans of Gwent who'd rather not dive into the multiplayer arena. Although some unique twists can't hold off some late-game tedium, it's a diverse campaign that emphasizes the strong characters and tough decisions that define the Witcher series, and values clever twists over turning newcomers into solid Gwent players. Whether you just want to play more Gwent or are simply a fan of The Witcher, playing Thronebreaker is an easy choice.

» **Suriel Vazquez**



Tetris Effect

A dazzling reinvention

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Puzzle **Publisher** Enhance **Developer** Monstars Inc., Resonair **Release** November 9 **Rating** E

9

Whether on CRT monitors, HDTVs, or the Game Boy's monochromatic display, Tetris has long been a reliable source of entertainment (and jaw-clenching stress) for puzzle-seeking players. Its elegant simplicity has made it an enduring success, but with Tetris Effect, Monstars Inc. and Resonair show it's possible to wring a few surprises from the classic game while respecting its primordial core. Tapping into their mastery of melding flashy audiovisual presentations with interlinked gameplay, the team has created a breathtaking interpretation of Tetris that makes the game feel fresh.

In Tetris Effect's showcase mode, Journey, you travel through a variety of vignettes while playing Tetris. The sound builds and morphs as you play, accompanied by dazzling visuals. A wintry theme might incorporate the rhythmic sounds of crunching snow as you set blocks in place, with jingling bells sounding with their rotations. You delve deeper into a space capsule while you clear lines, as snippets of transmissions play in sync with the thumping soundtrack and your positioning of the blocks. The tetrominos change with each level, too, though those are just cosmetic adjustments. Functionally, a block is a block, whether it's made of shimmering bubbles or rotating cogs.

It's hypnotic and wonderful, and a fantastic partner to the "in the zone" sensation that accompanies particularly good games of Tetris. I found myself instinctively rotating blocks in sync with the beat, and while it didn't offer any benefits as far as scores went, it pulled me deeper into the game. The beats build and recede like a great concert, culminating in a final level that is nothing short of magnificent. The visuals are amazing on traditional displays, but having your entire field of view enveloped by exploding particles and warping backdrops adds to the immersion – something I never thought I'd be concerned with in Tetris.

The biggest tweak to the overall formula in Journey is the time-stopping Zone mechanic, which gives you precious time to fix a few blunders or to finesse your way to even higher scores. One of my favorite things about Tetris is how you can extricate yourself from seemingly impossible situations; effective use of Zone makes those moments even more frequent. You have to earn it first, however, by clearing lines the old-fashioned way. Still, it's a good thing to have in your back pocket for when you need it.

A variety of other options offer further twists on Tetris' core. In Sprint, you try to clear 40 lines as quickly as possible. Marathon mode challenges you to eliminate 150 lines, which is easier said than done. In Purify, you have to clear dark blocks from the field by clearing lines around them. Mystery mode is one of my favorites even though it made me want to punch walls; random effects like bombs, reversed controls, and other nuisances crop up as you play a marathon session. Even though you're ultimately just clearing lines in all of these modes, they're a fun and rewarding way to mix things up when you hit a wall. While I'd argue it would largely be missing the point, you can turn down the visual effects and music and just play a great game of Tetris, too, with a variety of customization options such as how many blocks appear in the preview panes and how rotation works once a tetrominos lands.

The fundamentals may be recognizable, but Tetris Effect feels like something new rather than another reskin of the same old game. The presentation is such a natural fit for the gameplay, and it adds an unexpected layer of emotion. Monstars Inc. and Resonair should be commended for taking a calculated risk and delivering its own unique take on a gaming standard.

» **Jeff Cork**

PSVR • PS4

» **Concept**
Take the familiar block-busting action from Tetris and remix it with a flashy, interactive presentation

» **Graphics**
Particles explode and backgrounds shift and evolve while you clear lines, delivering a treat for the eyes

» **Sound**
From electronic jams to primal rhythms, the soundtrack is diverse and consistently excellent

» **Playability**
The time-stopping Zone mechanic adds a new layer to the tried-and-true gameplay. Other than that, it feels like classic Tetris

» **Entertainment**
Most of us have had intense moments with Tetris, but Tetris Effect's masterful musical accompaniment makes it emotionally resonant as well

» **Replay Value**
High

Earth Defense Force 5

A weakening resistance

Style 1 or 2-Player Action (4-Player Online) **Publisher** D3 Publisher **Developer** Sandlot **Release** December 11 **Rating** M

7

PS4

» Concept
Return to the front line of a war that prioritizes simple fun over depth and polish

» Graphics
Purely functional visuals convey what they need to, but nothing more. Expect your view to be obscured regularly by fire and guts – not to mention the wonky camera

» Sound
After so many installments, the dialogue (and its delivery) seems more like it's trying to be hokey, rather than earnestly failing at drama

» Playability
The basic controls work and are easy to use, though they're not always intuitive. Also, performance chugs when the action gets too hectic

» Entertainment
Even though the formula is familiar, teaming up with friends to exterminate the alien menace is enjoyable

» Replay Value
Moderately high

It may not be complex, but the core of Earth Defense Force 5 is accessible and entertaining. You are a soldier who (along with the optional assistance of co-op buddies) fights off an invading horde of giant bugs, frogs, UFOs, and more. You customize your loadout with weapons that range from awesome to awful. When your enemies are destroyed, they may drop new weapons for you to equip on future missions. Plowing through swarms of baddies while hoping for good loot is a pillar of countless games, and it retains its primal appeal here. However, Earth Defense Force 5 doesn't build on that foundation, even when compared to previous games in this series.

With cheesy dialogue and simple point-and-shoot gunplay, Earth Defense Force 5's presentation and mechanics take a back seat to pure arcade action. Jumping into the fray is easy, whether you're firing off hilariously short-ranged explosives or unleashing a barrage of powerful homing missiles. Your otherworldly foes explode in satisfying spurts of fire and goo, often flailing wildly from the generous application of exaggerated physics. The resulting B-movie vibe serves this experience well, doling out laughs while removing barriers between you and the main attraction: shooting at a screen full of enormous creatures with weapons of escalating destructive force.

The mayhem is charming, but Earth Defense Force 5 hits the same basic notes as its predecessors, parading out familiar enemies (or their analogues) in a routine that doesn't introduce many unique twists. The previous installment changed the dynamic by offering four classes with different specialties, and those same four options reappear this time around. You can technically use classes to strategize with your teammates online or in split-screen, like having the support-focused Air Raider help guide the Fencer's heavy firepower. However, the action rarely demands (or even encourages) that level of coordination. The balanced offense of the Ranger and airborne mobility of the Wing Diver classes remain the most satisfying and versatile options, especially for solo play.

Most of my favorite improvements to the formula are quality-of-life changes, like earning health and weapons for all classes, not just the one you are currently playing. This means that you aren't starting from scratch four times if you want to get a taste of what each playstyle offers. I also appreciate that picking up duplicates can increase the weapon's stats instead of just feeling like wasted effort.

Though the experience is more user-friendly, these changes aren't enough for Earth Defense Force 5 to gain any ground. It doesn't feel substantially different from when I first played Earth Defense Force 2017 over a decade ago. I'm shooting ants with rockets and machine guns of wildly inconsistent utility. I'm cackling as buildings collapse. I'm crossing my fingers for a better version of my favorite gun. It's fun, but it's practically identical to the fun offered by its predecessors. If this is your first time playing an EDF title, this fatigue may not be an issue; the idea at the heart of the game is still a blast. At the same time, Earth Defense Force 5 barely feels like a step up from a game that was considered clunky and unpolished in 2007.

As video games evolve, developers continually set new standards by creating experiences with sophisticated storytelling, heightened immersion, and jaw-dropping technology. Earth Defense Force 5 has none of those things – but that's okay. This series has always had a single-minded commitment to one simple truth: It's fun to use weird weapons to blast lots of aliens. That fact may never change, but in an industry that has been steadily raising the bar, Earth Defense Force 5 allows the series to fall further behind. **» Joe Juba**

Spyro Reignited Trilogy

Purple reign

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Action/Platforming **Publisher** Activision **Developer** Toys for Bob, Insomniac Games **Release** November 13 **Rating** E10+

Although Skylanders was red hot, none of Spyro's adventures hit the fever-pitch of popularity as his first game, 1998's Spyro the Dragon. The sequels were also well received, but that first game made him a household name. If you missed out on this wild platformer when it first released, developer Toys for Bob is giving you another chance to see why it is such an important game. This singular adventure fueled Spyro's fire for decades of games and stories, and after playing it again, I see why developers and publishers believe he remains relevant and is primed for another return.

Spyro Reignited Trilogy is a remaster that is faithful to the purple dragon's original journeys, yet modernizes them to deliver breathtaking graphics and dynamic audio. Last year's Crash Bandicoot N. Sane Trilogy received similar treatment, but given just how lightly detailed Spyro's worlds were back in the day, Toys for Bob took more liberties with the visuals.

The result is three games that often look radically different from their sources. What was once a textureless brown blob is now a highly-detailed tree that appears to have a story of its own to tell. A dog that moved awkwardly now has a variety of beautifully realized animations that visually convey the second it becomes a threat to Spyro. All three games look stunning by today's standards, but are near-perfect recreations of the originals. This means the level design and item placement are identical to Insomniac's work – and that's where this trilogy's age begins to cut through the new coat of paint.

These games are still ridiculously fun to play, but the path through them can be a bit difficult to wrap your brain around at first. In the first game, you don't really have any guidance to tell you what you should be doing other than reawakening dragons. Insomniac improves upon this formula in the second game, Ripto's Rage, and again in the trilogy's final act, Year of the Dragon. These three games are a great study of iteration. You can see how Insomniac learned from its mistakes, became more ambitious, and figured out how to create a clear through line for players.

Spyro was born in the wild west of game development when every developer was trying to figure out what the three-dimensional gaming would be. From that drive, the Spyro trilogy has a unique charm, and holds up well today. Just the general design of Spyro as a character is a game changer. As a four-legged hero, his basic movements offer a different feel and flow than your traditional platformer stars. When Spyro hops along, he can turn easily, just like any other platforming character, but once he puts his horns down to sprint, he takes on the maneuverability of a race car, only capable of making wide turns.

Spyro's horns also deliver unique and satisfying wallops to adversaries, and generate exciting gameplay moments where, at a great speed, the player needs to line up a direct hit or look like an idiot who flies right past the target. Even though Spyro is a tiny dragon, his fire breath gives him a powerful position in the world, imbuing the player with an enjoyable attack that can immediately melt adversaries.

The core move set is the backbone of each game, but the sequels expand upon the gameplay scope. Spyro eventually learns how to flutter, swim, and climb. None of the new moves are as exciting as his base moves, but they add depth. Sure, there may be too much swimming in Ripto's Rage, but it did shake things up. Insomniac even fell in love with the Tony Hawk games and puts our hero on skateboard for some challenges in Year of the Dragon. Other characters are also playable in this final act.

As memorable as these helper characters are, they may not appear that familiar in the remaster given how drastically Toys for Bob improves upon their character models. Hunter the Cheetah is still recognizable, but the same cannot be said for any of the elder dragons. Given how generic they were in the base games, Toys for Bob gave them all new identities, many themed to the specific regions of the world they occupy. They still say the same things, but are effectively new characters.

Given just how different the worlds look in remastered form, I found this trilogy to be more interesting and enjoyable to return to than Crash's. These games don't preserve history as well, but that's okay. Having already lived through them, it's fascinating to see how the worlds have been reimagined and differ from the vision I had in my head. If you've never played these games before, I can't recommend them enough. From a historical standpoint, you can clearly see the foundation for Insomniac's Ratchet & Clank series in each level. As a game, Spyro is a blast to control, and collecting gems is an oddly satisfying thing to do. You'll watch the credits roll on each game before you know what hit you. » **Andrew Reiner**

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One

» **Concept**
A remaster that keeps the classic gameplay intact, but modernizes the look and sound

» **Graphics**
Overhauled to deliver the detail we expect from games today. The worlds are teeming with life, and each dragon now has a unique personality

» **Sound**
Players can listen to Stewart Copeland's excellent original score, or switch to a remastered version that dynamically changes based on the player's actions, such as intensifying for combat

» **Playability**
Spyro's unique moveset is still a blast to use. The small sizes of the levels makes for breezy and rewarding progress

» **Entertainment**
All three games withstand the test of time and remain fun to play

» **Replay Value**
High

Pokémon: Let's Go, Pikachu & Eevee

A classic evolved

8.5

game informer SILVER

Style 1 or 2-Player Role-Playing (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Game Freak **Release** November 16 **Rating** E10+

Switch

» **Concept**
Bring players back to Pokémon's roots by remaking the first generation of games for Switch

» **Graphics**
The classic action of capturing Pokémon and battling trainers is brought to life through crisp 3D graphics

» **Sound**
Town and battle themes have been reworked and sound great, but the Pokémon cries from the Game Boy era feel more outdated with each passing advancement

» **Playability**
While battles and exploration are as fun as ever, finicky motion controls make catching Pokémon frustrating unless you're in handheld mode

» **Entertainment**
A fun stroll down memory lane for hardcore fans, and a strong entry point to the series for newcomers

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

After two decades on dedicated handheld platforms, the Pokémon franchise is finally relocating to the big screen. While we wait for the first full-fledged RPG to hit Switch, Pokémon: Let's Go, Pikachu and Let's Go, Eevee are remakes of the first generation of the series with modern graphics and updated gameplay. Exploring Kanto, building your team, fighting Team Rocket, and challenging gym leaders remains as thrilling as it was 20 years ago, but inconsistent motion controls ensure the transition to Switch isn't seamless.

Let's Go pulls you in with the same hooks as every other Pokémon game: You travel the region, collecting Pokémon, battling trainers in fun, turn-based combat, and earning your place in the Pokémon League in a lighthearted adventure. The series mantra of "Gotta Catch 'Em All" holds true to this day, as finding a ton of unique monsters remains rewarding as you fill in your Pokédex and build your dream party.

Let's Go remains faithful to the first-gen Pokémon games. I knew exactly where to go to complete quests, and still remembered the solutions to most puzzles. Despite being remakes, the Let's Go games effectively move the Pokémon franchise forward with crisp visuals that recreate the familiar creatures and cities of the Kanto region. Seeing the battles play out how I originally pictured them in my head is a thrill. In addition to upgrading the visuals and sound, Let's Go streamlines many of the more tedious elements of the original games.

From riding Pokémon for faster travel to swapping your party on the fly without having to visit a Pokémon Center, myriad modern conveniences make these remakes feel at home in 2018. Let's Go isn't challenging, but if you need an extra hand, a second player can shake a second Joy-Con to drop in to local co-op multiplayer. This updated approach is further demonstrated in Let's Go's modern evolution of one of Pokémon's oldest conventions: wild encounters.

Not only are random encounters gone (now you see wild Pokémon roaming in the map), but you no longer must battle wild Pokémon to weaken them prior to catching (with a few exceptions). Instead, you simply flick your Joy-Con in their direction – no battling necessary. Some players may miss having to weaken wild Pokémon first, but after the initial shock, I appreciated how it kept the pace up. Not only does this make wild encounters feel distinct from trainer battles, but it makes the few wild Pokémon you do need to battle first feel special.

However, the motion controls for catching Pokémon, whether you're using a Joy-Con or the Poké Ball Plus peripheral, are unreliable. On multiple occasions, I flicked my controller at the screen, only to have the ball sail in the wrong direction. Playing in handheld mode tones down the motion controls; you just aim with the gyroscope, then press a button to throw. This makes handheld mode the best way to play Let's Go, effectively deflating the excitement of the series being on consoles for the first time.

While you can find rare Pokémon in places you couldn't before, other avenues of collecting uncommon species have been removed. You can now use lures to draw out rare Pokémon, but I'm disappointed that the Game Corner no longer lets you play for items and Pokémon. My personal favorite, Safari Zone, has been replaced by Go Park, which lets you connect with Pokémon Go.

Using Go Park, you can transfer creatures from Pokémon Go to Let's Go. After that, you enter Go Park and encounter these Pokémon as you would a wild Pokémon. While I enjoy this integration, I still miss the surprising nature of Safari Zone encounters, and I'm disappointed you can't transfer Pokémon back to Pokémon Go once you're finished. I hated losing my shiny Charizard in Pokémon Go so I could have him in Let's Go. Also, if you're hoping to start your playthrough with a full team from Pokémon Go, you may be disappointed as you can't use this functionality until you're in Fuchsia City in the latter portion of the story.

Even if you're not interested in the Pokémon Go integration, Let's Go adds multiple reasons to keep playing. Throughout the adventure, you encounter coach trainers that put up a stiff challenge and reward nicely. Once you become champion, master trainers appear to put a specific Pokémon to the test. While these special types of trainers are among the most difficult in the game and sometimes give you good rewards for beating them, the most meaningful reason to keep playing is to continue filling in the holes of your collection, with Mewtwo serving as the ultimate post-game addition to your collection.

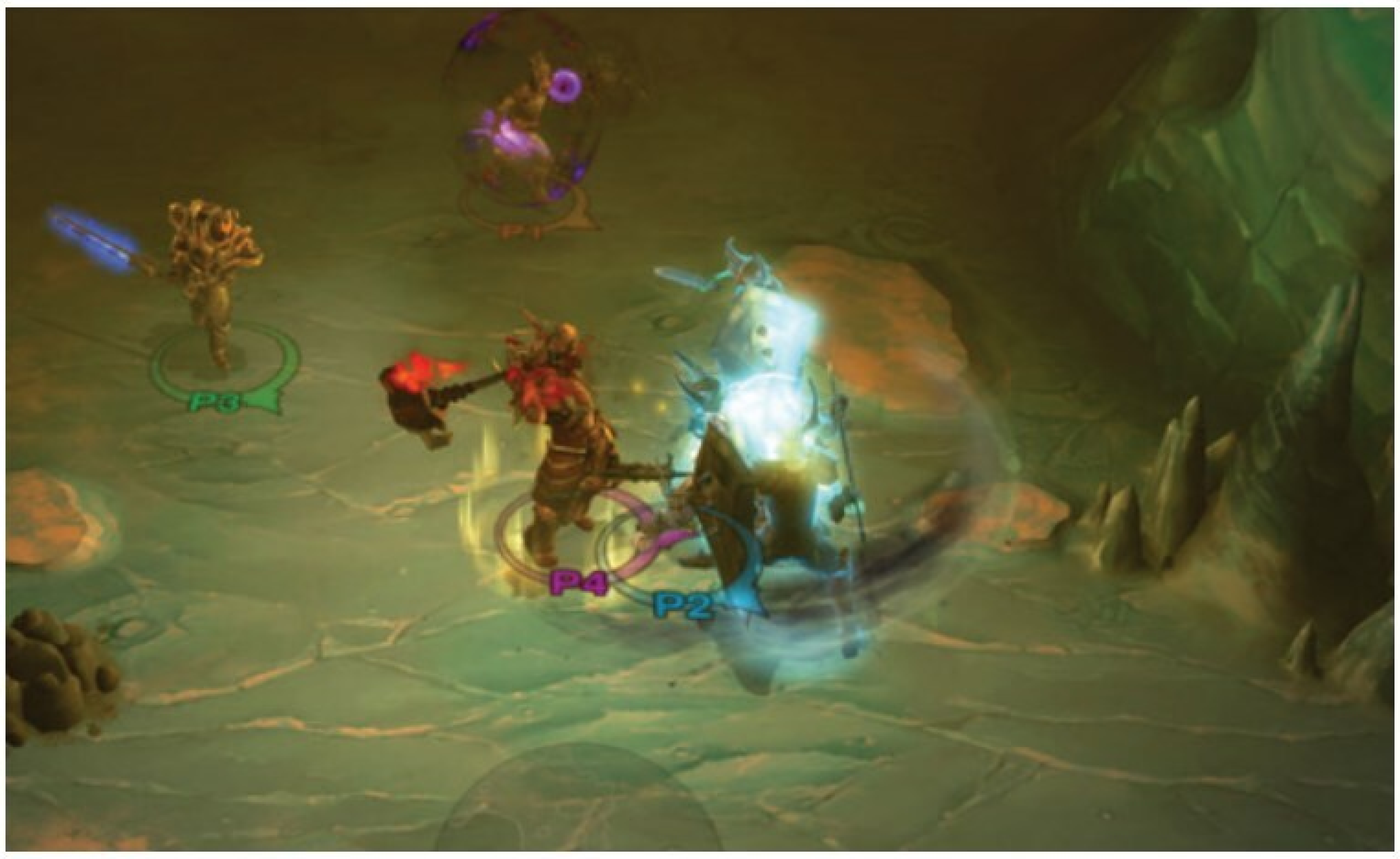
Pokémon: Let's Go, Pikachu & Eevee are strong remakes of the original games. The feeling of amassing a giant collection and customizing your team never gets old, and the timeless turn-based combat is still fun to this day. Shoddy motion controls aside, Let's Go is a great time whether you're a die-hard fan or a newcomer to the series. » **Brian Shea**

Diablo III Eternal Collection

Blizzard puts the devil in the details

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1 to 4-Player Action/Role-Playing (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Activision Blizzard **Developer** Blizzard Entertainment **Release** November 2 **Rating** M



Diablo III emerged from the shadows more than six years ago, but it has continued to thrive thanks to a steady stream of updates and expansions. The Switch's portable nature makes it a great home for this action/RPG, whether you're tackling some of its bite-sized challenges or settling in for an evening of demon-slaying with friends. Best of all, it's an uncompromising port that delivers all the chaotic action that makes Diablo III great.

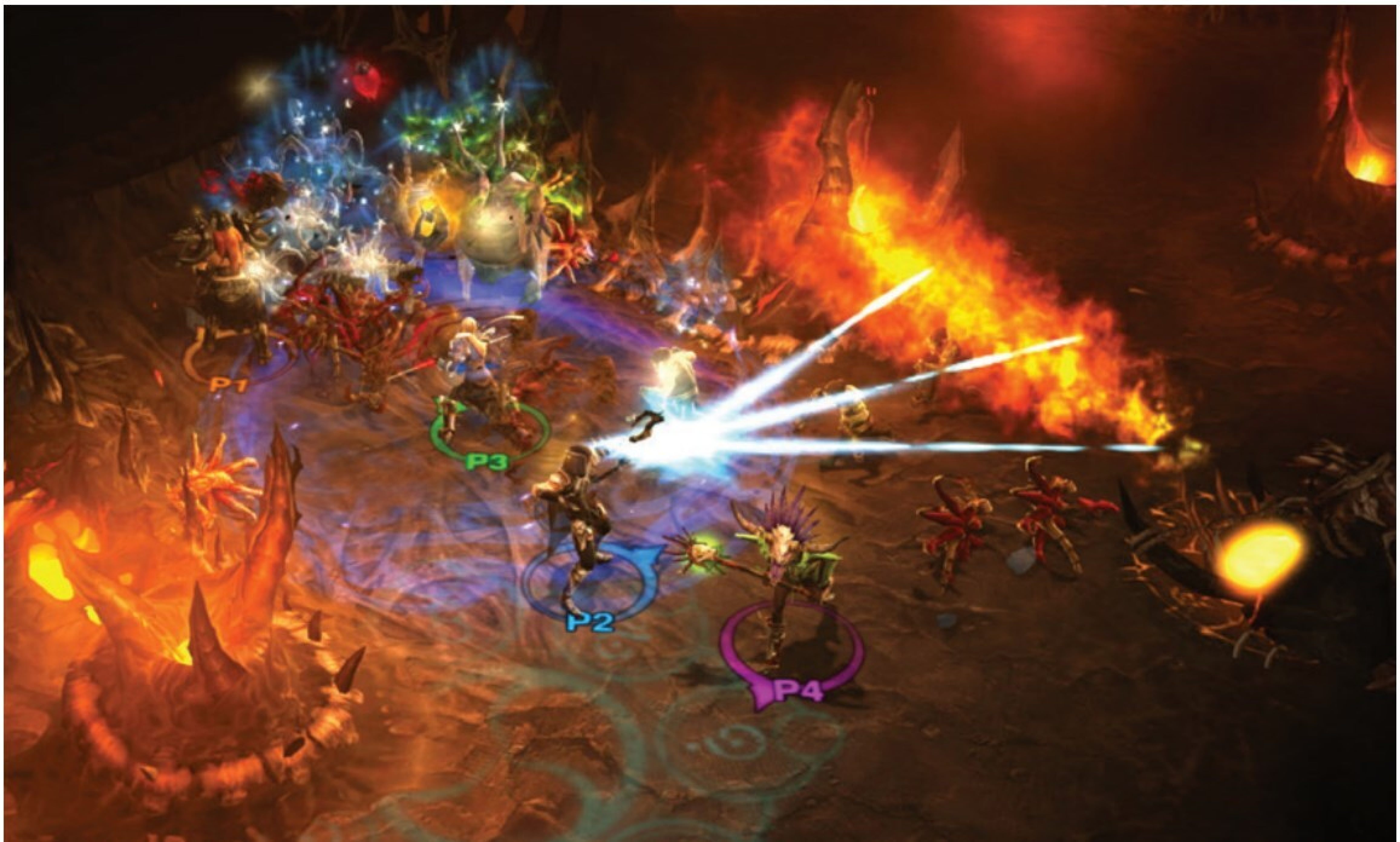
The Eternal Collection includes everything that's come to Diablo III so far, including the base game, its Reaper of Souls expansion, and last year's Rise of the Necromancer expansion. The Switch version also adds some fun cosmetics, such as a cucco pet and a Ganondorf-themed cosmetics set, and a way to summon powerful foes with Amiibos. Beyond these platform-specific additions, this is just the most recent version of Diablo III, but on the Switch.

The game runs beautifully on the hardware, whether portable or docked, and I didn't experience any distracting slowdown or graphical hitches during my playtime. It remained rock solid in four-person local co-op, too, even as we filled the screen with my necromancer's herd of skeletons, a witch doctor's army, and a crusader's barrage of spectral hammers. It really is a technical marvel. The only real graphical compromise that stood out was how some details washed out in the zoomed-in character screens. In the actual game, however, it looks great.

It plays well, too. I preferred using a Pro controller, but the default Joy-Cons do a serviceable job in a pinch. The text is small – particularly if you're looking at the Switch's screen – but I didn't run into any problems with legibility. Inventory management can be a pain, especially when you're trying to sort through and compare large quantities of gear, but those are legacy nitpicks that have been around since the game originally came to console.

One of the most welcome things about this port is that new players can dive right into the adventure mode without having to complete the campaign first. Adventure mode is where the "real" game is, filled with challenges that are designed to be beaten and replayed, such as clearing out enemies in rifts or running through short bounty quests. I'd still recommend that new players roll through the story, since it introduces some of the basic systems in an easy-to-digest format, but if you've done it before there's no reason to slay Diablo and his cronies yet again.

Even after all these years, I still find Diablo III's loop of starting small and becoming a godlike force of destruction irresistible. Even without major new additions, the Switch's portability makes it easier than ever to pop into Sanctuary, kill a few hundred monsters, and scoop up some sweet new loot. » **Jeff Cork**



9

Switch

» **Concept**
Grow your character from a puny nothing to one capable of shaking the gates of hell, collecting a hoard of loot along the way

» **Graphics**
Visuals on Switch take a slight (but ultimately inconsequential) hit from its more powerful predecessors. However, the action remains detailed and impressive

» **Sound**
The orchestral score adds weight to the action, and the sound of legendary gear dropping still evokes the same Pavlovian joy

» **Playability**
The text can be a little small in handheld mode, but that's the biggest quibble I have overall

» **Entertainment**
The long and short of it is that this is simply Diablo III on Switch. It's the same great game, featuring frenzied action, alluring gameplay loops, and few technical compromises

» **Replay Value**
High

PS4		
Assassin's Creed Odyssey	8.25	Dec-18
Call of Duty: Black Ops 4	9.5	Dec-18
Destiny 2: Forsaken	9.25	Nov-18
FIFA 19	8	Nov-18
Fist of the North Star: Lost Paradise	7	Dec-18
Golf Club 2019, The	8	Nov-18
Jackbox Party Pack 5, The	8	Dec-18
Jurassic World Evolution	7	Aug-18
Labyrinth of Refrain: Coven of Dusk	8.5	Dec-18
Lego DC Super-Villains	8.5	Dec-18
Life is Strange 2: Episode 1 – Roads	8.25	Dec-18
Mega Man 11	8.75	Nov-18
Missing: J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories, The	8	Dec-18
My Brother Rabbit	7.75	Nov-18
NASCAR Heat 3	7.5	Nov-18
NBA 2K19	9	Nov-18
NBA Live 19	7	Nov-18
NHL 19	8.5	Nov-18
Pro Evolution Soccer 19	8.5	Nov-18
Red Dead Redemption II	10	Dec-18
Shadow of the Tomb Raider	7.5	Nov-18
Soulcalibur VI	8.75	Dec-18
Starlink: Battle for Atlas	8	Dec-18
Timespinner	7.75	Dec-18

XBOX ONE		
Assassin's Creed Odyssey	8.25	Dec-18
Call of Duty: Black Ops 4	9.5	Dec-18
Destiny 2: Forsaken	9.25	Nov-18
FIFA 19	8	Nov-18
Forza Horizon 4	9.25	Dec-18
Golf Club 2019, The	8	Nov-18
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Phantom Doctrine	8	Oct-18
Pro Evolution Soccer 19	8.5	Nov-18
Red Dead Redemption II	10	Dec-18
Shadow of the Tomb Raider	7.5	Nov-18
Soulcalibur VI	8.75	Dec-18
Starlink: Battle for Atlas	8	Dec-18

SWITCH		
Jackbox Party Pack 5, The	8	Dec-18
Labyrinth of Refrain: Coven of Dusk	8.5	Dec-18
Lego DC Super-Villains	8.5	Dec-18
Mega Man 11	8.75	Nov-18
Messenger, The	8	Nov-18
Missing: J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories, The	8	Dec-18
Monster Hunter Generations Ultimate	8.5	Nov-18
My Brother Rabbit	7.75	Nov-18
NBA 2K19	9	Nov-18
Starlink: Battle for Atlas	8	Dec-18
Super Mario Party	7.5	Dec-18
Wandersong	7	Dec-18
Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus	8.5	Sep-18
World Ends with You: Final Remix, The	7.5	Dec-18
Xenoblade Chronicles 2: Torna – The Golden Country	7	Nov-18

PC		
Assassin's Creed Odyssey	8.25	Dec-18
Bard's Tale IV: Barrows Deep, The	7.75	Nov-18
Call of Duty: Black Ops 4	9.5	Dec-18
Destiny 2: Forsaken	9.25	Nov-18
Dragon Quest XI: Echoes of an Elusive Age	8.25	Oct-18
FIFA 19	8	Nov-18
Forza Horizon 4	9.25	Dec-18
Golf Club 2019, The	8	Nov-18
Guacamelee 2	8.75	Oct-18
Jackbox Party Pack 5, The	8	Dec-18
Labyrinth of Refrain: Coven of Dusk	8.5	Dec-18
Lego DC Super-Villains	8.5	Dec-18
Life is Strange 2: Episode 1 – Roads	8.25	Dec-18
Mega Man 11	8.75	Nov-18
Messenger, The	8	Nov-18
Missing: J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories, The	8	Dec-18
My Brother Rabbit	7.75	Nov-18
NASCAR Heat 3	7.5	Nov-18
NBA 2K19	9	Nov-18
Overcooked 2	8	Oct-18
Prey: Mooncrash	8.5	Sep-18
Pro Evolution Soccer 19	8.5	Nov-18
Return of the Obra Dinn	8.75	Dec-18
Shadow of the Tomb Raider	7.5	Nov-18
Soulcalibur VI	8.75	Dec-18
Timespinner	7.75	Dec-18
Two Point Hospital	7.5	Nov-18
Wandersong	7	Dec-18

VITA		
Chasm	7.5	Sep-18
Timespinner	7.75	Dec-18

3DS		
Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker	8	Sep-18
WarioWare Gold	8	Oct-18

iOS		
Jackbox Party Pack 5, The	8	Dec-18
Walking Dead: The Final Season – Episode 1, The	7	Oct-18

3 The Quiet Man

Platform PS4 • PC **Release** November 1 **Rating** M

With a mishmash of awful storytelling and mechanics, this narrative-infused brawler plays like a failed proof-of-concept prototype. Even though it has technically released, The Quiet Man doesn't feel finished; the entire experience is a series of cascading embarrassments that make you wonder how it escaped cancelation. ***– Joe Juba***

7 Déraciné

Platform PSVR **Release** November 6 **Rating** T

Déraciné approaches VR in the right way, letting the player soak in the environment at their leisure, but the teleportation movement is awkward and most of your engagement outside the narrative hinges on how much you enjoy picking up objects, looking at them, and putting them somewhere else. ***– Kyle Hilliard***

7 Persona 3: Dancing In Moonlight

Platform PS4 • Vita **Release** December 4 **Rating** T

Being able to tailor the rhythm-based gameplay to your liking makes it easy to dive in and nod along to your favorite songs, even if the setlist is short and revisits a few songs too often. If you're eager to revisit the cast or music of Persona 3, Dancing in Moonlight is worth a few excursions into the Dark Hour. ***– Suriel Vazquez***

7 Persona 5: Dancing In Starlight

Platform PS4 • Vita **Release** December 4 **Rating** T

Persona 5's soundtrack helped define its captivating sense of style when it released last year, and Dancing in Starlight is a good celebration of it. The clumsy dancing interface and short tracklist make it fall short as a rhythm game, but some great remixes and fun progression hooks make it a worthwhile way to revisit the look, feel, and sound of one this generation's most stylish RPGs. ***– Suriel Vazquez***

8.5 Gwent: The Witcher Card Game

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC **Release** October 23 **Rating** T

After years of iteration as a minigame and in beta, Gwent has come into its own as a great card game. It emphasizes keen decision-making over chance, and a great back-and-forth buildup ratchets up the tension across multiple rounds. ***– Suriel Vazquez***

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STAFF

Publisher
Cathy Preston cathy@gameinformer.com
Editor-in-Chief
Andy McNamara andy@gameinformer.com
Executive Editor
Andrew Reiner reiner@gameinformer.com
Managing Editor
Matt Bertz mattbertz@gameinformer.com
Senior Reviews Editor
Joe Juba joe@gameinformer.com
Senior Previews Editor
Matt Miller miller@gameinformer.com
Features Editor
Kimberley Wallace kim@gameinformer.com
West Coast News Editor
Imran Khan imrankhan@gameinformer.com
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Daniel Tack daniel@gameinformer.com
Digital Editor
Brian Shea brianshea@gameinformer.com
Senior Editors
Matthew Kato kato@gameinformer.com
Jeff Cork jeff@gameinformer.com
Ben Reeves ben@gameinformer.com
Senior Associate Editors
Jeff Marchiafava jeffm@gameinformer.com
Kyle Hilliard kyle@gameinformer.com
Associate Editors
Javy Gwaltney javy@gameinformer.com
Elise Favis elisefavis@gameinformer.com
Suriel Vazquez surielvazquez@gameinformer.com
Creative Director
Jeff Akervik jeffakervik@gameinformer.com
Senior Production Director
Curtis Fung curtis@gameinformer.com
Senior Graphic Designer
Laleh Azarshin Tobin laleh@gameinformer.com
Graphic Designers
Samm Langer sammlanger@gameinformer.com
Jen Vinson jenifervinson@gameinformer.com

Web Designers/Programmers
Margaret Andrews margaretandrews@gameinformer.com
Kristin Williams kristinwilliams@gameinformer.com
Video Producer
Ben Hanson hanson@gameinformer.com
Video Editor
Leo Vader leovader@gameinformer.com
Circulation Services
Ted Katzung ted@gameinformer.com
Audience Development Manager
Paul Hedgpeth paul@gameinformer.com

ADVERTISING SALES

Associate Publisher
Rob Borm rob@gameinformer.com
Advertising Sales Director
Damon Watson damon@gameinformer.com
Senior Advertising Sales Associate
Amy Arnold amy@gameinformer.com
Advertising Manager
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SMASHING ONTO THE SCENE

How a small team led by Masuhiro Sakurai and Satoru Iwata created one of the most ambitious crossover franchises in video games

by Brian Shea

Super Smash Bros. Ultimate launches this month on Switch with 74 characters, more than 100 stages, and a soundtrack featuring more than 900 songs. Despite the massive scope of the series today, the franchise emerged from meager beginnings, starting as a passion project from a three-man team at Kirby and EarthBound developer HAL Laboratory.

Satoru Iwata and Masahiro Sakurai, the co-creators of the Kirby series, began development on a prototype fighting game in 1996. According to an Iwata Asks interview, Iwata handled all the programming for the prototype, while Sakurai worked on planning, design, modeling, and movement. One additional team member helped with the sound. The small team worked on the project alongside other development obligations.

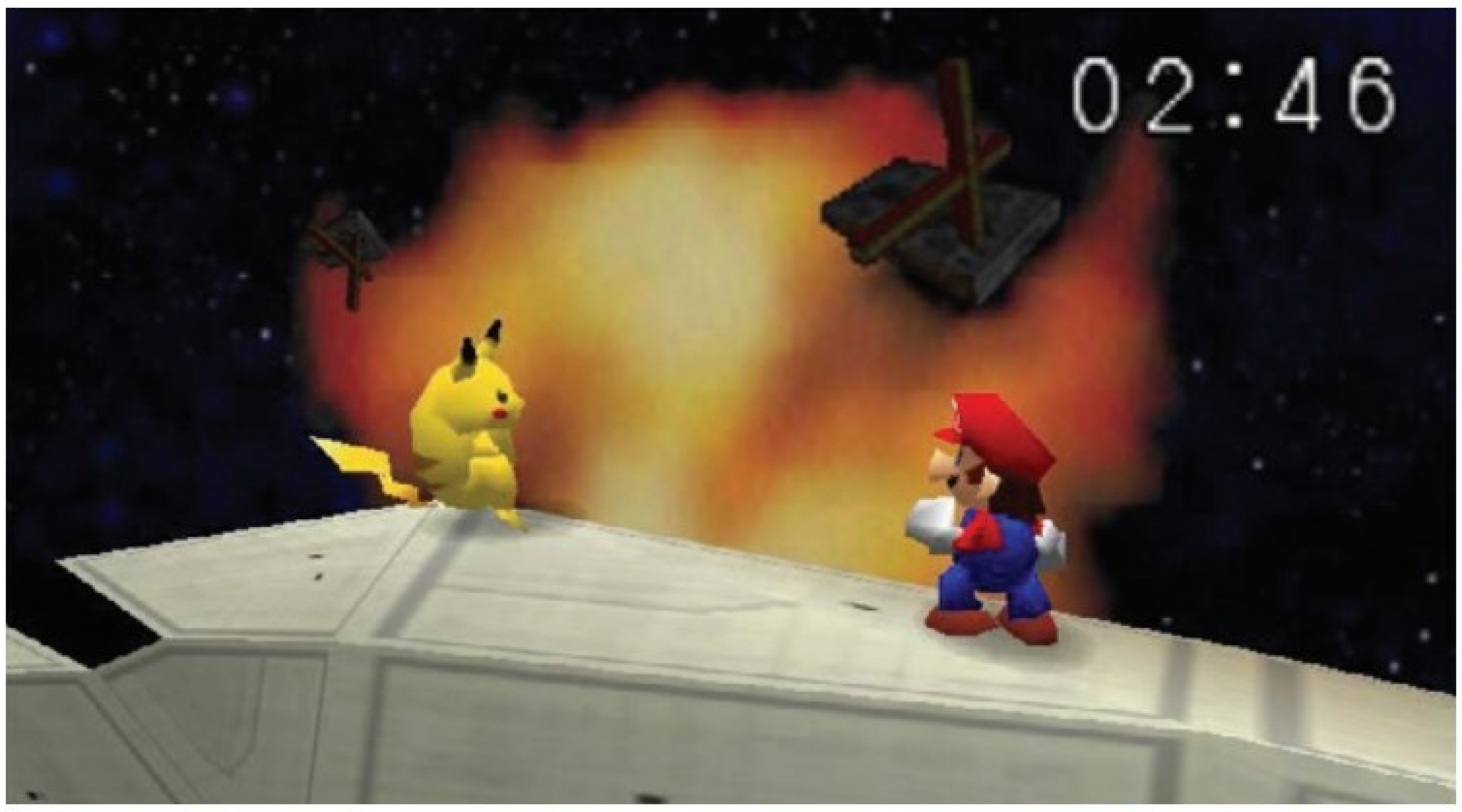
At the time, Iwata was getting pulled to another project that took up most of his time. "I didn't have any time during the week and had to program on the weekends," he said. "I would assemble the data and specs, and the project slowly took shape as we sent changes back and forth."

Sakurai said in that discussion that Iwata seemed to spring to life when he had time to work on the side project. "I felt something special about this title from the very first moment I started programming for it," Iwata said in response to Sakurai's observation.

The two wanted to build a four-player game that used the control stick on the Nintendo 64 while simultaneously offering a unique take on the 2D fighting game genre. Sakurai wrote "Four-player Battle Royal" on the cover of the planning document before the prototype even had a working title.

The two called the prototype Kakuto-Geemu Ryuoh, or Dragon King: The Fighting Game. The project didn't use any Nintendo characters or locations, instead relying on generic, faceless characters with a photograph Sakurai took of Yamanashi Prefecture, the Japanese neighborhood of HAL Laboratory's office, serving as the backdrop.

Sakurai knew the importance of incorporating recognizable characters for a home console release. "With a game for the arcade, it's okay for character development to take a backseat since



The Roster That Almost Was

In addition to the 12 characters that made the final roster of the original Super Smash Bros., several other characters were considered for inclusion. On separate occasions, series co-creator Masahiro Sakurai has said that characters like Marth, Mewtwo, Bowser, and King Dedede were all considered. In an interview for the Making of *Fire Emblem: 25 Years of Development Secrets* book, Sakurai said Marth came from the idea of complementing Link with another sword fighter. Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto even told *Nintendo Power* before launch that Bowser was going to appear in the game. Each of the four characters mentioned by Sakurai have appeared in subsequent titles.

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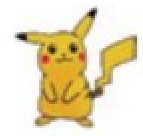

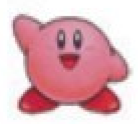

players are content with the fighting," Sakurai said in the Iwata Asks interview. "With a fighting game for the home console, however, you have to set up the general image or the atmosphere of the gaming world right from the start or else the game suffers. That's why I asked to use Nintendo characters."

Use of Nintendo's stable of all stars didn't come easy. Not only did Iwata have reservations about the fan reaction to having Nintendo characters fight each other, but Nintendo also had concerns. Shigeru Miyamoto reportedly refused to let HAL use Nintendo characters. Despite this, Iwata instructed Sakurai to produce a working prototype using them anyways. Iwata took a prototype starring Mario, Donkey Kong, Samus, and Fox to Miyamoto. The demonstration impressed the famed creator and he gave the green light to HAL to use Nintendo characters for the project.

After Nintendo gave HAL the go ahead, Sakurai and Iwata set out to make a game that was accessible to a wider range of players than a typical fighting game. "I had created Smash Bros. to be my response to how hardcore-exclusive the fighting game genre had become over the years," Sakurai wrote in a 2010 column for *Famitsu*. "If we want new people from this generation of gamers to come in, then we need it accessible, simple, and playable by anyone."

With the idea that anyone could pick up the game and have as much fun as a longtime player within 10 minutes, the duo worked to craft a game that appealed to everyone. "We shouldn't try and separate the casual gamers from the core gamers," Iwata said in his discussion with Sakurai. "After all, everyone starts off as a casual gamer. Some of these casual gamers will end up falling in love with gaming. Despite this fact though, I think that people too often treat them as entities that are inherently different."

Super Smash Bros. effectively bridged the gap between casual and hardcore players. Despite the cute graphics, basic controls, and roster of recognizable characters, learning the intricacies of each character and how to not only use their abilities and positioning, but the items and stages to your advantage takes untold hours.

The game shipped with 12 characters from popular franchises. At the start, players could choose from Mario, Donkey Kong, Link, Samus, Yoshi, Kirby, Fox, and Pikachu. By completing special challenges, players could add Luigi, Captain Falcon, Ness, and Jigglypuff to the crossover battlefield.

Super Smash Bros. was a big success for Nintendo 64, only being outsold on the platform by Super Mario 64, Mario Kart 64, GoldenEye 007, and Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time. The mission of Sakurai and Iwata of appealing to all gamers paid dividends and laid the foundation for one of Nintendo's most successful and broadly appealing franchises.

While critics were mostly positive on the original game, the series has only strengthened since. Every console entry following the Nintendo 64 version has achieved higher than a 90 on Metacritic (the 3DS version sits at an 85 average). In addition, the series served as Nintendo's first esports hit, with dedicated communities centered around both Super Smash Bros. Melee and Super Smash Bros. for Wii U still going strong today.

Looking back, the small roster and feature suite of the Nintendo 64 game seem like nothing in contrast to the behemoth offerings that have come with subsequent games, but at the time, seeing those characters fight each other unlocked players' imaginations. As Sakurai and his team launch the self-proclaimed ultimate version of Super Smash Bros. nearly two decades later, players can only speculate at how the series will grow and evolve from here.

Everybody Wants To End The World

So many dangers are present in the universe that it's a surprise we're all still here. Video games have predicted our great demise a number of times, so can you match these ultimate ends with their corresponding game? ***by Ben Reeves***

1. Sunset Overdrive

2. The Division

3. Resistance

4. Resident Evil

5. Chrono Trigger

6. The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker

7. Darksiders

8. Horizon: Zero Dawn

9. Doom

10. Gears of War

11. Frostpunk

12. Metro 2033

13. Rage

14. The Last of Us

A. "Aliens! And they're destroying our history too."

B. "Robot dinosaurs! Somehow, we knew this was coming."

C. "Stupidity … and our own nuclear weapons."

D. "Biters/Coldbodies/Creepers/Lamebrains/Lurkers/the walking dead … er, what do you call them? Zombies?"

E. "More aliens, but not from another planet. They've just been hanging out underground."

F. "The 'Biblical' Apocalypse … sort of."

G. "Mushrooms might be tasty, but this fungus drives you crazy."

H. "Dammit, demons!"

I. "Pestilence. No, that's not something you spray on a garden."

J. "I don't know where global warming went wrong, everything is frozen."

K. "A giant sleeping space parasite."

L. "What's in the sky? Oh, a meteor. So pretty."

M. "Everyone is drinking bad soda."

N. "Grab your swim trunks. It's a worldwide flood."

Answers 1:M, 2:I, 3:A 4:D, 5:K, 6:N, 7:F, 8:B, 9:H, 10:E, 11:J, 12:C, 13:L, 14:G

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